# A Theoretical Study of Zhang Ailing's Short Story Collection *Chuanqi*

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# A Theoretical Study of Zhang Ailing's Short Story Collection *Chuanqi*

## *Abstract*

This thesis applies three literary theories as approaches to the study of *Chuanqi*, the short story collection of the modern Chinese writer Zhang Ailing.

A feminist reading of *Chuanqi* demonstrates that the social roles of women are actually the projections of men's desires. Women, deprived of the right to define themselves, can only struggle to live up to men's expectations which, however, twist their mentality. A Lacanian study of *Chuanqi* points out how characters keep transforming their desires into fantasies which, once condensed into signifiers, will be imposed upon other people, the embodiments of the signifieds. However, the characters' desires are never satisfied since people always fail to act in accordance with the signifiers tagged to them. The symbolic disjunction brings to light the irrevocable process where desires turn into disillusions. Bakhtin's theory illustrates that the discourses of characters are the manifestations of their ideologies, whereas the encounters between different ideologies are doomed to end in conflicts. In *Chuanqi,* the collisions between characters due to their incompatible views of life highlight the arguments of Bakhtin.

The inharmonious relationships between characters also account for the main point of Zhang's essay, "The Religion of the Chinese," in which she contends that the secularization of Chinese people results from their emphasis on the maneuvering of relationships. Zhang's overview of Chinese religion indicates her obsession with China. Zhang is engaged in a decadent mentality that prompts her to indulge in the decay of Chinese civilization. Decadence brings forth the sense of desolation which

haunts all the stories in *Chuanqi* as we see how characters, unable to detach themselves from civilization, are besieged with desolation because their desires are left unfulfilled within the restrictions of a civilized society.

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# Introduction

## Zhang Ailing and *Chuanqi*

This thesis is an analytical reading of *Chuanqi*, the short story collection of the modern Chinese writer, Zhang Ailing. I applied three western literary theories to the study of the stories in order to make a connection between the Chinese and the western literary scenes and to see how oriental and occidental interactions can help us re-evaluate these short stories that have already been explored by numerous essays and academic papers.

Zhang Ailing was born in Shanghai in 1920. She became a professional writer in Japanese occupied Shanghai by contributing essays and movie reviews to the English journal, *Twentieth Century.* But she did not attract considerable publicity until two of her Chinese short stories, "Chenxiang Xie—Diyi Luxiang" 沉香屑—第一爐香 (Aloe Ashes—The First Burning) and "Chengxiang Xie—Dier Luxiang" 沉香屑—第二爐香 (Aloe Ashes—The Second Burning) appeared in the magazine, *Ziluolan* 紫羅蘭 (*Violet*) in 1943. The following three years witnessed the marvelous productivity of this writer. Blessed with great inspiration, Zhang produced many acclaimed short stories and essays, the majority of which were published in journals such as *Zazhi* 雜誌 (The Magazine), *Wanxiang* 萬象(The Miscellaneous) and *Tiandi* 天地 (Heaven and Earth), while later on she also started to serialize her novels in magazines and newspapers.

Zhang left China for the United States a few years after the Communist Party came to power, and for the rest of her life, she led a reclusive life there. Her initial attempt to rise to fame in the American literary arena with her anti-communist novels, *The Rice Sprout Song* and *Naked Earth*, was greeted by a series of failures. She then devoted the latter part of her life to the English translation of the late-Qing novel, *Haishanghua Liezhuan* 海上花列傳 (*Sing-song Girls of Shanghai*) as well as the textual research of the Chinese classic, *Honglou Meng* 紅樓夢 (*Dream of the Red Chamber*), monographs on which were finally published as a book entitled *Honglou Mengyan* 紅樓夢魘 (*The Nightmare about Dream of the Red Chamber*). In 1995, Zhang was found dead in a shabby room in Los Angeles; shortly thereafter, her death became the headlines of most Chinese newspapers and ushered in an era that has featured a feverish study of Zhang Ailing and her works.

*Chuanqi* was first published in 1944 by Zazhi publishing house. It contained ten stories Zhang had written from 1943 to 1944: "Aloe Ashes—The First Burning", "Aloe Ashes—The Second Burning", "Moli Xiangpain"茉莉香片 (The Jasmine Tea), "Xin Jing" 心經 (The Heart Sutra), "Qingcheng Zhilian"傾城之戀(Love in a Fallen City), "Jinsuo Ji" 金鎖記 (The Golden Cangue), "Fengsuo" 封鎖 (Shutdown), "Liuli Wa"琉璃瓦 (The Glazed Tiles), "Nianqing de Shihou" 年輕的時後 (In the Years of Youth), and "Huadiao"花凋 (A Wilted Flower). In 1947, Shanhe Tushu Company published an enlarged edition of *Chuanqi* that incorporated the following works: "Deng" 等 (Waiting), "Guihuazheng Ah Xiao Beiqiu"桂花蒸阿小悲秋 (Steamed Osmanthus Flower Ah Xiao's Unhappy Autumn), "Hongmeigui yu Baimeigui" 紅玫瑰與白玫瑰 (Red Rose and White Rose), "Hong Luan Xi" 鴻鸞禧 (Great Felicity) and "Zhongguo de Riye"中國的日夜 (Days and Nights of China). In 1994, Crown Publishing Corporation in Taiwan published the complete edition of Zhang Ailing's works in 15 volumes, two of which are the collections of all the works compiled in the enlarged edition of *Chuanqi*, respectively entitled *Diyi Luxiang—Zhang Ailing Duanpian Xiaoshuoji Zhi Yi* 第一爐香—張愛玲短篇小說集之一 (*The First Burning—The Collection of Zhang Ailing's Short Stories I*), and *Qingcheng Zhilian—Zhang Ailing Duanpian Xiaoshuoji Zhi Er* 傾城之戀—張愛玲短篇小說集之二 (*Love in a Fallen City—The Collection of Zhang Ailing's Short Stories II*).

Crown Publishing Corporation, authorized by Zhang to publish the corpus of her works, was granted the final versions of these short stories revised and scrutinized by the writer herself. In this thesis, I utilized the edition of *Chuanqi* published by Crown Publishing Corporation as it provides the finished texts of the stories which account for Zhang's conclusive views on her early works.

*Chuanqi* stands for the climax of Zhang's literary career. It is the constellation of her works usually considered to be the full display of her talent. Her short stories are always appreciated for her keen attentiveness to the details of life which make her language a fine tapestry teeming with lengthy narratives and delicate portrayals of the smells and tastes of food, of fabrics, cosmetics, jewels, and of the adornment of houses furnished with exquisite decorations. A world crowded with material pleasures is, however, integrated with her keen observation and unrelenting revelation of the corruption of people trapped in a decadent life. The uncanny combination of material floridity and spiritual bleakness in *Chuanqi* not only registers the uniqueness of Zhang Ailing as a writer but has also invited many critics and scholars to quarry from her works the perceptions that differentiates Zhang from her contemporaneous writers.

## A Review of Early Scholarship

Major critics and their comments on Zhang's works are categorized and displayed here in a chronological order of their publication. The bulk of the literature on her writings can be roughly divided into four phases of time. The first period begins in the first half of the 1940s, when Zhang captured the attention of the reading public of Shanghai shortly after the successive appearance of her fiction and essays in mass-circulation magazines. The days between 1943 and 1945 marked the most fruitful time of Zhang's literary career which reached its climax when *Chuanqi* was published. The literary reviews of her works, however, are relatively sparse, and most of them only focus on Zhang's debt to the literature of *yuanyang hudie pai* 鴛鴦蝴蝶派(Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies), stories of which are usually charged with a narrow vision that essentially covers no other subjects than the relations between men and women.

Fu Lei 傅雷 mounted an attack on Zhang's fiction in his essay "Lun Zhang Ailing de Xiaoshuo" 論張愛玲的小說 (On the Fiction of Zhang Ailing), published in *Wanxiang* in 1944. Though never grudging his praise of Zhang's expert maneuvering of languages, Fu is especially unsettled by the nihilistic hedonism which, he assumes, ruins the artistic achievement of her short story, "Love in a Fallen City":

> Nearly half of the story's space is taken up by flirtation: it's all a spiritual game of cynical hedonists.... All this pretty dialogue and the games of make-believe and hide and seek—they float on the surface of the heart; luring and teasing, the trivial battles of attack and defense—all concealed a falsehood [...]. This kind of comedy, so bloodless at gut level, of course can come to no good end. (trans. by Leo Ou-fan Lee, in Lee 280)

The criticism is leveled against the phony glamour of the story generated by the unctuous conversations that constitute the philandering game between the characters.

Fu, then, urges Zhang to broaden her vision and to harbor in her works something other than the tales of love:

> I do not want to blame the writer for only focusing on the relationships between men and women. But the world of fiction leaves room for other

> kinds of stories. Human beings are not only charged with one or two kinds of emotions either. If the writer can alter her perspective on life, she will probably be able to rid her works of this indifferent and bloodless sentimentality. (Fu 16)

Leo Ou-fan Lee presumes that Fu's well-meaning but penetrating disparagement of Zhang "elicited a long and nuanced response from [...] herself which shed a great deal of light on her fictional technique" (281). However, as Gu Cangwu 古蒼梧 notices (60), Zhang's essay "Ziji de Wenzhang" 自己的文章 (Writing of One's Own) can also be taken as the refutation of the critical evaluation of her works by another critic Tan Zhengbi 譚正璧. Tan claims that "the mental and physical movements of all the characters in Zhang's stories are under the control of their lusts. Therefore, his or her actions are fully motivated by their perverted psychologies and madness. It seems that they live only to fulfill their sexual desires." He appeals to Zhang to write for "the defiance against the all-encompassing suppression, rather than for the liberation of desires which stand for only part of human nature. Writing for the defiance against suppression is the cry from the public; writing of the liberation of desires is merely the complaints, maybe the biased ones, of an individual" (Tan 45, 44).

What concerns Fu is the small scope of Zhang's fiction which centers on domestic issues and love affairs creating an inanimate atmosphere especially in her short stories (Fu 12). Tan, irritated by the depictions of degenerate people tormented by their unanswered cravings, suggests that Zhang should devote her talents to writing about anti-feudalism and anti-capitalism (Tan 44). Among the weighty comments made by Zhang's contemporaries, those by Hu Lancheng 胡蘭成 adopt a rather different criterion. Once labeling Zhang an individualist, Hu discovers that it is her faith in individualism that grants her the insights into the pains of each of her characters, and reveals the tragedies everyone could be subjected to:

> She writes about the horrors and evils in life, about people who are cruel or people who are wronged. When reading her stories… the readers, together with the writer, forgive these characters and want to console the maltreated ones. We forgive, because we feel frightened by the fact that the vicious and ruthless ones are actually the miserable losers […]. The writer is sympathetic to the fragility of the mighty ones, while she offers something healthy and jubilant to the weak ones. This is the way she is: because she can understand, she is thus full of compassion (Hu, "Ping Zhang Ailing" 20).

Hu's essays about Zhang introduce a view that is unique in this period, and even transcends its measure of judgment on literature, since he does not regard her works inferior to those engaged in topics about nationalism and revolutions. Moreover, Hu points out the reason why Zhang tries to portray the ordinary majority "who actually bear the weight of the times" (A. Zhang, *Written on Water* 17). His words about Zhang can therefore become "the footnotes of Zhang's philosophy for her writing" (Gu 66).

Zhang's attention to the inner struggles of people solicits long paragraphs of scrutiny and discussion in the essay by C.T. Hsia, the major critic of the second period. Hsia's book, *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction*, was published in 1961, when Zhang had already left China, and had gradually faded from readers' minds. The book indeed reminds and even informs the reading public and the critics of her works because Hsia ranks Zhang as "the best and most important writer in Chinese today." His overwhelming praise does not stop here. Hsia even asserts that "her short stories alone invite valid comparisons with, and in some respects claims superiority over, the work of serious modern women writers in English" (*A History of Modern Chinese Fiction* 389). The unreserved admiration is followed by his probe into the metaphors and the twisted psychologies of some of her characters. Hsia's monograph of modern Chinese literature had a groundbreaking impact on the study of Zhang not only in that this was one of the earliest English commentaries on her works which introduced her literary flair to non-Chinese readers, while we should bear in mind that Zhang's painstaking efforts to win their hearts all came to no avail. Also, his comments on Zhang were later on translated into Chinese by his brother, Xia Ji'an 夏濟安, and published in the magazine, *Wenxue Zazhi* 文學雜誌 (Literary Journal). For Chinese readers, Hsia challenges the stereotype of our knowledge of modern Chinese writers by awarding Zhang a high position among her contemporaries. But his most impressive achievement is the dauntless emphasis on Zhang Ailing compared to Lu Xun, given the fact that the chapter about Zhang is almost twice as long as the chapter on Lu Xun. No one has ever dreamed of paralleling the leading figure of modern Chinese literature by a writer whose works are often categorized as one of the feuilleton. Moreover, Hsia's careful reading of Zhang's texts, including the analysis of the mood swings of the characters, the attentions to the natural imagery in her stories, and the constant comparison between her and other European, American and British writers, inspires succeeding scholars to the potential reading of her works from the eyes of a western theorist.

The third period is initiated by the aftermath of Hsia's book. Shui Jing 水晶 and Tang Wenbiao 唐文標 are the pioneers in publishing books solely devoted to the study of Zhang and her works. The first edition of Shui Jing's book, *Zhang Ailing de*

*Xiaoshuo Yishu* 張愛玲的小說藝術 (*The Art of Zhang Ailing's Fiction*), was available in 1973. Even if published twelve years after C.T. Hsia's influential work, it is still the first omnibus of essays all dedicated to research on Zhang. It provides both his interviews with the writer and his analysis of the structures, metaphors, and psychologies of the characters in her stories. The record of his private meeting with Zhang, precious in that she had been living like a hermit since moving to the United States, foresees the boom in Zhang biographies that happened after her death. Following C.T. Hsia's footsteps, Shui Jing employs the method of applying western theories to readings of Zhang's works. Furthermore, his juxtaposition between Zhang Ailing and Henry James is the threshold of the comparative study between Zhang and modern western writers.

In contrast to Shui Jing, Tang holds a rather ambiguous attitude toward Zhang's writings. On the one hand, he defines "serious literature" as something that can "help society to progress, rather than encumber it, and trap it in decadent Epicureanism." The short stories by Zhang certainly offend his moral requirements of literature as he contends that "the world of Zhang Ailing is a world of death. There is no hope, no future generations, and no beauty of youth. Characters in these stories never think about tomorrow" (Tang 120-21). It is obvious that the lack of ethical preoccupations dispossesses Tang of his appreciation of Zhang. On the other hand, however, Tang is one of the most zealous collectors of any piece of writing by and about Zhang. Two of his books, *Zhang Ailing Zasui* 張愛玲雜碎(*Assortments of Materials about Zhang Ailing* ) and *Zhang Ailing Ziliao Daquanji* 張愛玲資料大全集 (*The Complete Collection of Materials about Zhang Ailing*), published respectively in 1976 and 1984, witness the accomplishments of the research on Zhang at its early stage. Tang's gleanings have also benefited later critics who either work on the further collections of similar materials to give a more authentic portrayal of the writer and her life or who aim to get an unabridged chronology to delineate the development of her literary career.

Edward Gunn's book, *Unwelcome Muse: Chinese Literature in Shanghai and Peking (1937-1945)*, published in 1980, registers its significance in that one of the chapters is actually a disquisition on Zhang and her short stories. Meanwhile, translations of Zhang's fiction and essays continue to appear in the Chinese-English translation magazine, *Renditions*. The crescendo of the emphasis on Zhang in the world of the English academy denotes how the Chinese critics' growing concern for her have also affected western sinologists.

In the autumn of 1995, "the headlines in all the Chinese newspapers" reported Zhang's death, which in turn rekindled the passion for Zhang's works in readers, writers and scholars of "the Chinese-speaking areas of Taiwan, Hong Kong, and mainland China" (Lee 267). Books about Zhang Ailing mushroomed and glutted the market, and the study of Zhang thus launched into its fourth period. The huge amount of literature on Zhang appearing in this period can be roughly divided into four sub-groups: anthologies of essays, books of criticisms and commentary by individual authors, biographies, and English references.

Crown Publishing Corporation made its contribution to the first group with the book, *Huali yu Cangliang: Zhang Ailing Jinian Wenji* 華麗與蒼涼: 張愛玲紀念文集 (*Florid and Desolate: Anthology in Memory of Zhang Ailing*, 1995). Following this, two essay collections were published that collated essays from two conferences on Zhang, held respectively in Taipei and Hong Kong: *Yuedu Zhang Ailing: Zhang Ailing Guoji Yantaohui Lunwenji* 閱讀張愛玲: 張愛玲國際研討會論文集 (*Reading Zhang Ailing: Collected Essays Presented at the International Forum on Zhang Ailing*,1999) and *Zaidu Zhang Ailing* 再讀張愛玲 (*Reading Zhang Ailing Again*, 2002). Scholars in Taiwan and mainland China have also been engaged in gathering articles about Zhang. Zheng Shusen 鄭樹森 and Su Weizhen 蘇偉貞 edited two books both entitled *Zhang Ailing de Shijie* 張愛玲的世界 (*The World of Zhang Ailing*, 2003), while Jin Hongda 金宏達 is the editor of a series of books published in Beijing: *Huiwang Zhang Ailing: Huali Yingchen: Jiuwen, Zhuisi, Yingxiang* 回望張愛玲: 華麗影沉: 舊文、追思、影響 (*A Retrospective of Zhang Ailing: The Setting of Her Splendid Shadow: Early Criticisms, Reminiscence, Influences*, 2003), *Huiwang Zhang Ailing: Zuoye Yuese: Shengping, Jiashi, Jiaowang* 回望張愛玲: 昨夜月色: 生平、家世、交往 (*A Retrospective of Zhang Ailing: The Moonlight of Last Night: Life, Family Background, Acquaintances*, 2003), and *Huiwang Zhang Ailing: Jingxiang Binfen: Xiaoshuo, Sanwen, Dianying* 回望張愛玲: 鏡像繽紛: 小說、散文、電影 (*A Retrospective of Zhang Ailing: The Flourishing Images in the Mirror: Novels, Essays, Films*, 2003). To name only a few selections can give us a hint of the colossal number of books of this category. The rich collections of writings about Zhang definitely benefit anyone who has even the slightest interest in her, let alone enthusiastic scholars and critics. However, since these collections are the convergence of a variety of views on the same writer, they rarely employ a consistent and coherent criterion when evaluating Zhang's literary career, but rather offer miscellanea of articles for the readers to choose their own favorite.

Individual writers and critics have also aspired to present their personal judgments on Zhang. The book by Shui Jing, entitled *Zhang Ailing Weiwan* 張愛玲未完 (*More Words about Zhang Ailing*, 1996), contains summaries and analyses of most of her short stories, while another book published in the same year by Zhang Jian 張健, *Zhang Ailing Xinlun* 張愛玲新論 (*New Comments on Zhang Ailing*), also displays the author's interpretations of Zhang's works. Both a writer and a critic, Zhou Fenling 周芬伶 is also known for two of her studies on Zhang, *Yanyi: Zhang Ailing wu Zhongguo Wenxue* 豔異: 張愛玲與中國文學 (*The Uncanny: Zhang Ailing* *and Chinese Literature*, 1999) and *Kongque Landiao: Zhang Ailing Pingzhuan* 孔雀藍調: 張愛玲評傳 (*The Hue of Green Blue: A Biography and Comment on Zhang Ailing*, 2005). While giving the rare account of Zhang's correspondence with her second husband in order to have her reclusive life in America peep out from behind the veil of obscurity, Zhou's books also provide a feminist approach to Zhang, which is, however, by no means more dominant than it is in the works of the Hong Kong scholar, Lin Xingqian 林幸謙. In his book, *Lishi、Nüxing yu Xingbei Zhengzhi: Chongdu Zhang Ailing* 歷史、女性與性別政治: 重讀張愛玲 (*History, Women and Gender Politics: Re-reading Zhang Ailing Again*, 2000), Lin applies a feminist reading to map out feminist concerns in Zhang's writings. *Meili you Cangliang de Shoushi: Wo kan Zhang Ailing* 美麗又蒼涼的手勢: 我看張愛玲 (*A Beautiful but Desolate Gesture: My View on Zhang Ailing*, 2003) by Fei Yong 費勇 is another example to demonstrate the writer's free will of taking specific aspects, for example, the mental states of the characters or the maneuvering of metaphors, to reshape our understanding of Zhang's stories. Wan Yan's 萬艷 book, *Haishang Huakai you Hualuo—Jiedu Zhang Ailing* 海上花開又花落—解讀張愛玲 (*The Blossoming and Wilting of the Flower on the Sea—An Interpretation of Zhang Ailing*, 1996), is unique in that it shuttles between the accounts of Zhang's life and the readings of her literary productions. Sometimes the judgment is tinged with the writer's sentiments, thus making the book more like a report from one of Zhang's fervent readers than an academic work from a discreet scholar. Selections by a single writer, however, atone for the lack of unitary views the anthologies may be blamed for. Nevertheless, none of these works on Zhang Ailing render a single value or a systematic estimate that could run through all the works they have research on. The result is that readers encounter individual views scattered all over the place without grasping the integral logic in the literary world of Zhang.

Biography is the genre that might stand for the largest portion of literature about Zhang, but the qualities and authenticity of some of them still leave room for further examinations. As some biographers just patch together the material they glean from various sources and complete the books with strokes of their unrestrained imaginations, their productions are rather like fictions with the supply of a few factual documents. Despite this, the work of Sima Xin 司馬新 is a biography worth reading. His book, *Zhang Ailing and Lai Ya* 張愛玲與賴雅 (1996), informs readers of Zhang's life in America which had, until Sima Xin's book, remained a mystery. With his endeavor to collect as many of Zhang's letters as possible and to visit the acquaintances of both Zhang and her second husband, Lai Ya, this biography does contains credible materials for consultation. The Taiwanese writer, Ji Ji 季季, conducted several interviews with Zhang's brother, Zhang Zijing 張子靜, and then organized and exhibited this information in the book, *Wode Jiejie Zhang Ailing* 我的姊姊張愛玲 (*My Elder Sister Zhang Ailing*, 2005). The book is the supplement to the biography by Sima Xin because it recounts the first half of Zhang's life, spanning her childhood and the few years when her literary career had the most splendid sheen in Shanghai. Among the biographies of Zhang that flood bookstores, these two, franchised by the writers' contacts with Zhang's relatives and the references of her correspondence, actually reveal to the readers the developments of Zhang's ideas about literature at different stages of her life and the concepts of art she is convinced of.

Compared with the scholarship in Chinese, English scholarship still lags behind in terms of its quantity and depth, but critics in this field have started to try to catch up. The most impressive progress falls on the large number of English translations of Zhang's works. *Renditions* has contributed two selections: a translation of Zhang's works and some of the commentaries on her titled *Eileen Chang* (published as the special issue of *Renditions*, no. 45) (1996) and *Traces of Love and Other Stories* (2000). Furthermore, the English translation of the collection of Zhang's essays by Andrew F. Jones, *Written on Water* (2005), puts in place one more piece of the jigsaw puzzle which should show a clear picture of this Chinese writer to the English reading public. The tendency in English works on modern Chinese literature to allocate parts of their texts to the exploration of Zhang has become stronger in recent years. In her book, *Woman and Chinese Modernity: The Politics of Reading Between West and East* (1991), Rey Chow devotes one chapter to the discussion of how the detailed narrations in Zhang's works reflect her feminist speculations, while portions of Leo Ou-fan Lee's book, *Shanghai Modern: The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China, 1930-1945* (1999), are engaged in the interactions between Zhang's stories and their cultural backdrop, Shanghai.

The flourishing of English research on Zhang can also be detected by the growing number of doctoral theses on her works. Karen Sawyer Kingsbury's work, *Reading Eileen Chang's Early Fiction: Art and a Female Sense of Self* (1995), should be dated as the first dissertation in English, the total consideration of which is invested in the survey of Zhang's early productions. But this dissertation is very hard to get hold of, given that it cannot be ordered through the University of Michigan's ProQuest service. As I do not have access to this work, I am thus unable to consult it and give a list of the stories covered. Another dissertation by Chen Ya-Shu, *Love Demythologized: The Significance and Impact of Zhang Ailing's (1921-1995) Works* (1998), addresses Zhang's pessimistic perspectives on how the romance of love is eroded in tedious marital life. It requires more labor to advance the investigation of Zhang in English, since there is still no complete translation of Zhang's works. The fact may, to some degree, hinder English-speaking scholars and students from acquiring a reliable profile of the writer and her stories. More English treaties are also desirable, given that most of the existing reviews either examine particular issues about her stories or cast a glance at most of her books and reach an equivocal conclusion that could be applied to the works of other writers if they evince similar concerns.

It is impossible for a brief retrospect of the early scholarship to provide a comprehensive bibliography of every piece of writing that has touched upon Zhang and her works. Rather, it is an attempt to sort the constellation of these references in order to descry the potential for future research in this area. Assuming that there should be an English study of Zhang that encompasses the entire spectrum of one of her selections, I propose, in this thesis, to delve into all the short stories in *Chuanqi* and put forward an original and in-depth view on this collection.

The fundamental theme I shall discuss in this thesis is the sense of desolation which pervades Zhang's works and which marks her uniqueness among other modern Chinese writers. Moreover, the fact that the desolate atmosphere does not only derive from the threat of war Zhang is confronted with but is also created by her reflection on the drawbacks of civilization leads me into the research on the conflict between civilization and desire.

## Civilization and Desolation

The collected short stories in *Chuanqi* do render a vivid picture of Zhang's uniqueness in terms of writing styles and individual perspectives on life, while the preface to the second edition of *Chuanqi* displays two key elements which will recur in the rest of the thesis, the idea of *cangliang* 蒼涼 (desolation), and that of Zhang's feminist concerns.

The preface begins with Zhang's craving for the publication and popularization of her works, which, then, turns into a panic that foreshadows the inevitable devastation at the end of the world and that also conjures up the concept of desolation:

> Ah! Make yourself famous as early as you can! If success comes too late, the pleasure of it isn't as intense. The first time I published a couple of pieces in the school magazine, I was deliriously happy, poring over the pages again and again, as if seeing the words for the first time. But nowadays, I'm not so easily excited. Which is why I have to push myself even harder: Hurry! Hurry! Otherwise it will be too late! Too late! Even if I were able to wait, the times rush impatiently forward—already in the midst of destruction, with a still-greater destruction yet to come. There will come a day when our civilization, whether sublime or frivolous, will be a thing of the past. If the word I use the most in my writing is "desolation", that is because this troubling premonition underlines all my thinking. (*Written on Water* 199)

As Leo Ou-fan Lee has observed, "at first sight, this seems to be a plea concerning her need for instant fame." However, it is incongruous for a "popular best-seller" to "link one's own fate with a vague sense of 'desolation'" (287). The phantom threat of doom that keeps haunting Zhang is brewing at the outbreak of the Second World War, when she studied at Hong Kong University and then later recorded her wartime experiences in the essay, "Jin Yu Lu"燼餘錄 (From the Ashes).

The war suspended all classes and the students, forced to leave the university accommodation and thus became homeless, could not survive "save to join the defense effort" by registering at "the Air-Raid Precaution headquarters" (*Written on Water* 42). No sooner did Zhang and her classmates leave the headquarters than an air raid occurred. People on the street all fled for shelter. Zhang packed herself into a crowd and, all of a sudden, the sense of desolation gripped her:

> The door of the building was crammed with people in bulky winter clothes, redolent of brilliantine. Looking above their heads, I saw a brilliantly clear pale blue sky. The emptied tram sat in the middle of the street. The space outside the tram was full of pale sunlight; the tram, too, was filled with sunlight, and that lone tram possessed at that moment a sort of primitive desolation all its own. (*Written on Water* 42)

The pathetic irony in this passage is illustrated by picturing the tram, the scientific achievement of civilization, in "a sort of primitive desolation," which reminds us of Zhang's prediction that one day, our civilization, suffering massive destruction, "will be a thing of the past."

The bitter bleakness continues to creep over everyone stranded in Hong Kong, and Zhang finally realized that civilization vouched for nothing:

> Throughout the eighteen days of the siege, was there anyone who did not experience that unbearable, half-past-four-in-the-morning feeling? Waking to another trembling dawn, surrounded by fog, cowering from the cold, with nothing to depend on. No way home. And if or when you got home at all, you might not find it there anymore. Homes can be destroyed, money transformed into worthless paper in the bat of an eyelid, other people can die. And one's own life? Precarious at best. (*Written on Water* 45)

House, money, and anything that once marked the value of one's life only manifests the vulnerability of a civilization burnt out by the conflagration of war. People who drag out their existence in the ruins are enshrouded in the impending despair of being dispossessed and bereft. As hopes for cultural advancement are eroded one after another, what is left is the primordial barrenness that antedates the development of the history of human beings.

The havoc of war, therefore, feeds Zhang's sense of desolation:

> Zhang is acutely sensitive about the epoch. She is so sensitive that she thinks an epoch will not last longer than one's life. Moreover, the epoch is resonant with the melody of devastation, and the worse devastation is still to come. While staying with the devastation, she foretells an even worse devastation. No wonder Zhang slips into the state of desolation. (Yang Zhao 楊照, "Zai Wangwang de Weixiezhong" 254-55)

To be disillusioned with the promise of civilization, Zhang adopts a nihilistic attitude toward life. The preface informs us that her historical perspective consists of a downward spiral of destruction. Scanty of optimism, Zhang hence fosters her aesthetics of desolation that only thrives in the age of chaos. The desolation refers not only to the imminent annihilation of the world, but also to the transience of her literary career.

Ke Ling 柯靈, the former editor of the journal, *Violet*, laments that wartime Shanghai is the best place for Zhang to become an established fiction writer:

> I counted on my fingers for calculation, and then realized that in the huge arena of modern Chinese literature, there was no place for Zhang Ailing to establish herself. She won her chance only when Shanghai was under the occupation of Japan. The Japanese invaders and the regime of Wang Jingwei 汪精衛 repudiated the tradition of new literature. They would only

> accept whatever contained no hostile attacks against them. They craved for some literary and artistic works to whitewash the real state of affairs; they cared nothing about what could be offered. As the people in power paid little attention to literary circles, Zhang was allowed to fully display her talents. After China defeated Japan, there followed a time of complete turmoil and disorder, of constant battles and civil strife. Literature was next to nothing [...]. The prime time of Zhang's literary career lasted for only two years (from 1943 to 1945). It was her destiny. She rose to fame through the type of rare opportunity that happens only once in a thousand years. (21)

Ke's comments indicate two critical questions: Why is Zhang excluded from the group of *xin wenxue* 新文學 (new literature)? And how can she constitute her literary achievements when Shanghai fell into the hands of Japan?

Ke's definitions of different periods of *xin wenxue* signal the answers to the first question:

> The movements of new literature in China have always been connected to those of politics [...]. The literary revolution in the May Fourth period advocated the ideas of anti-imperialism and anti-feudalism. The focus of the revolutionary literature in 1930s was on class struggle. During the Sino-Japanese war, the major concerns of writers were those of the people: they had to share the same enmity towards Japanese aggression; fighting against Japan and saving the country became the dominant literary trend. Anything that did not follow this trend would be considered rebellious and illegitimate, unaccepted by the literary orthodoxy and ignored by readers.

(20)

The motif of new literature in the historical landscape of modern China, as far as Ke is concerned, always partakes of patriotism. Writers who do not show the passion in boosting the nation's welfare bear the imputations of self-centeredness and escapism. Zhang is, however, particularly indifferent to the grand narrative which intends to embellish the spirit of a nation. The demolishing ferocity of the war only inspires in her an aversion to issues concerning revolution and nationalism. In "From the Ashes," she argues that "rigid and unswerving worldviews, be they political or philosophical, cannot help provoking the antipathy of others. What's usually called joie de vivre is to be found entirely in trivial things" (*Written on Water* 40). In determining the way to reflect upon the tumult of an eventful age, Zhang has apparently chosen a road different from that of the writers of new literature. Her isolation from new literature, however, contributed to her success.

As Ke has pointed out, the fervent emotion of patriotism that was featured in the works of new literature irritated the Japanese authorities. As can be expected, these books were inevitably banned. The disappearance of new literature from the literary scene of Shanghai, however, left Zhang a fertile field to cultivate her talents which made her "an instant literary celebrity" (Lee 268). The fact that Zhang's literary career flourished at a time when the stage for new literature was confiscated is further attested to in the following commentary by Yang Zhao:

> The political stand of the colonial power contradicts and thus cancels out that of the nationalist writers of new literature. As men's ideological war claims its outcome through actual military conflict, there is more space for women to voice their affection and concerns about the details of life.

> Zhang Ailing is the best explorer of this space. As the colonizers do not actually perceive any threat from the feminine stories which highlight the themes of sentimental love and the minutiae of life, they do not want to grapple with the trouble of scrutinizing female literature. As a result, what survives in the narrow space not bombarded by the war and colonization is not the fighting and shouts of men, but the sorrow and happiness of women. ("Zai Wangwang de Weixiezhong" 262)

At this point, we can explain why Zhang is flustered by the difficult to define threat that hurries her to publish her works. If the threat is not groundless, there are, at least, two possible causes. On the one hand, the savageness of war does implant in her the sense of insecurity and uncertainty. On the other:

> the desolation and sadness that besiege Zhang come from her full understanding that it is only in the age of catastrophe and of vagaries that she is granted the chance to showcase her talents. Her literary career and the fame that came from it all depend on the calamity which leaves a vacuum in modern Chinese literature. She is more aware than others that this empty state can not, and should not last long. But she has the aptitude, gifts, and ancestry which best suit this disastrous age. (Yang Zhao, "Zai Wangwang de Weixiezhong" 258)

Yang Zhao's opinion just raises another question: Why do Zhang's "aptitude, gifts and ancestry" only blossom and come to fruition in troubled times? Her attributes that work so well in a turbulent world are indebted to her family background. In the book *Duizhao Ji* 對照記 (Reflections: Words and Pictures), the last one published during her lifetime, Zhang keeps reminding readers she is the great granddaughter of Li Hongzhang 李鴻章, a high official in the late Qing dynasty. Obviously, in the twilight of her life, she is still obsessed with and proud of her outstanding lineage.

Song Jiahong 宋家宏 notices that to be sentimentally attached to her noble blood accounts for Zhang's psychology of being the lost one, marooned in a new society she finds so hard to be compatible with after the Qing dynasty has been overthrown:

> We should not forget that she is the daughter of a declined aristocracy [...]. She is "the lost one," losing the motivation to pursue and carry out the ideals for a new society [...]. The environment most agreeable to her is the one drenched with decline. On the one hand, she laments the desolation of life. On the other, she also relishes and appreciates the desolation, in order to feel satisfied and balanced at heart. Therefore, she requires a constant discovery of the "desolation" and "dejection" in life. Shanghai during the time of the Sino-Japanese war provides the social atmosphere congenial to her psychology. (169)

It is worth mentioning that Zhang's unique birth presages her uncanny fascination with the air of desolation, which was only available when Shanghai was occupied by Japan. The circumstances that allowed and inspired her to write disappeared soon after the Communist party gained control of China, whereupon she departed and never returned. "Her premonition proved prophetic: like a meteoric star that suddenly blazed over Shanghai's literary firmament and then vanished, her glory faded abruptly after she left China in 1952." (Lee 268).

However, if the fall of Shanghai to the Japanese curiously gives rise to the fame of Zhang Ailing, what brings her works back to the attention of critics and readers growing up in an age far removed from the war? If the nationalist literature faded into oblivion when the chaotic age was gone, what sustains readers' interests in Zhang's stories? Chen Fangming 陳芳明 contends that " if we review the anthologies published both by private and official corporations during the Sino-Japanese war, we can conclude that there is a huge amount of works which deserve no literary evaluation. They can only be taken as propaganda" (239).

What, then, acquits Zhang's works of becoming one of the pieces of propaganda is her concern about the so-called "trivial things" she refers to in "From the Ashes":

> The "trivial things" are things that have nothing to do with the war. Zhang's unique way of thinking determines the differences between her and other contemporary writers. While many writers showed their consideration for the fate of the whole human race, Zhang Ailing chose to explore the fate of an individual. While others were passionate and clamorous in making notable their patriotism, Zhang Ailing brought into light the female consciousness. (F. Chen 240)

Zhang places her vision outside the field of the war and concentrates it on how the fragile, egoistic, and timid sides of human nature are unveiled as the war chips away the garnish of civilization. She comes to the poignant conclusion in "From the Ashes" that the college students, the group of cultivated people, when involved in the war, only feed themselves on the most primitive and crude libidinal drives. Zhang thus bemoans: "Once you dispose of all the specious ornaments of culture, what seems to remain is merely 'food and drink, man and woman.' Human civilization does its best to transcend the realm of the bestial, but could it be that several thousand years of work have been nothing but wasted effort?" (*Written on Water* 51).

For Zhang, "food and drink, man and woman," the so-called "trivial things" that suggest issues of little magnitude are, however, the major concerns of ordinary people:

> The war has twisted people's mind and life. This is the truth of reality. Under circumstances like these, helpless civilians were forced to break away from their ordinary life. The supply for the basic needs of fuel materials, rice, oil and salt was completely out of kilter. There might be moments when nationalism came into their minds. But for most of the time, they only cared about personal safety [...]. It would be too pretentious for them to be worried about the crisis of a nation or a race. The subtlety and insightfulness which enrich Zhang's works are that her characters do not play the roles of righteous and courageous people, but they are the embodiments of real people. They cling to each other for help and for warmth when everyone is bogged down in a restless world. Even if their craving for solace is nothing but a dream, in tumultuous time, this carving is eternal. (F. Chen 242-43)

Following Chen's observation, we are informed of the fact that Zhang's writings do not retire into obscurity because her portrayals of the self-interest of people approximates the truth of life, and therefore outperforms and outlives the stereotyped eulogies of nationalism. Chen's remarks, however, evoke two questions: How do people's wish for solace become eternal? In what way does the wish become relevant to the “female consciousness” that Zhang displays in her works? The answers to the questions will present themselves in the study of Zhang’s feminist concerns.

The preface to *Chuanqi* inaugurated by the writer’s omen of the pending threat and the clutching sense of desolation continues with an abrupt description of *bengbeng* opera 蹦蹦戲, the lowbrow plebeian entertainment which Zhang went to see with a married lady. The story of the opera happens in a wasteland of northwest China, the sterile countryside where the primitive has its complete presence:

> As soon as the *huqin* player began to tune up, I listened with a strange twinge of sorrow to the high winds and distant skies of the melody, intertwined with the squeak of strings. “Heaven and earth dark and brown, cosmos vast without bounds,” the wind blowing through the northern passes, howlingly pursued by the emptiness in its wake, with nowhere to stop and rest [...]. In the poor cave dwellings of the northwest, people can only live the most rudimentary of lives, and even that is no easy matter. (*Written on Water* 200)

The barren and dismal setting recalls the vein of desolation characteristic of Zhang’s works. A place embraced by the somber heaven and earth which project the image of an abysmal cosmos resembles the ruins left by the war. Under circumstances where civilization is on the verge of annihilation, a domestic affair appears on stage.

“A dashing young commanding officer on horseback” comes across a “poor country woman” who turns out to be his mother. The officer, to ensure her identity, starts investigating her background. “‘What was your father’s name? Who was your mother? What about your older brother?’ She answers each question.” Zhang, then, gives her reflections on the domestic scene that seems to be a mismatch of this desert setting. "Living in cave dwellings, with storms of dust and stones perpetually whipped across the door by the dusky wind outside, one's existence is restricted to simple facts: who is your father, who's your mother, your brother, your sister-in-law? There's very little to remember, so nothing's ever forgotten" (*Written on Water* 200). The pathos of the story about the reunion of a mother and her son are dampened by the writer's nonchalant voice that delivers a report of the straitened situation the characters are confronted with. The play, deprived of its sentimental ending where "the characters are expected to be torn between happiness and sadness with tearful eyes," suggests "Zhang's imagination of an anti-civilization society" (J. Zhang 193, 194). In this savage world, people cannot possibly follow the formula of kitsch soap operas that usually trumpet dramatic emotionality. Thus, the unromantic interaction between the mother and the young officer, though averse to the audience's anticipation, works to demonstrate the primordial rule when civilization is at its initial stage: family starts with the names of blood relatives.

The scene of wildness in this *bengbeng* opera not only allows for the idea of desolation to hang over the entire preface, but also reveals to the readers the inscrutable relationship between desolation and civilization. If civilization is inclined to devastation, as Zhang asserts at the beginning of the preface, what causes this sense of desolation is not only the wrecks left by the destruction, but also the desperate and often fruitless labors of human beings in trying to restore civilization out of annihilation. Or civilization itself has denoted desolation, which is the connection alluded to in Freud's essay, "Civilization and its Discontents," written just a few years before his death. In trying to track down the reason that causes the dissatisfaction of human beings, Freud comes to a contention that "what we call our civilization is largely responsible for our misery, and that we should be much happier if we gave it up and returned to primitive conditions" ( 274). But is this the most accessible expediency to renounce civilization in hope of restoring human happiness without the regard to "its esteem and encouragement of man's higher mental activities […] and the leading role that it assigns to ideas in human life" (Freud 283)? And there ensues a series of even more intractable questions: Can human beings completely strip themselves of civilization? If not, how do they face the predicament that tears them between the demand for and the detestation of civilization? How does Zhang's response to the discontents of civilization inform us of her feminist perspectives?

As far as Freud is concerned, civilization functions to defend human beings against the ferocious power of nature, and to discharge mankind from the barbarity of the beasts. It also spells people's incontestable quest for order that helps to discipline those who lavish their free will on imprudent behaviors. The demand for order, however, foreshadows the sufferings of people whose individual freedom confronts the regulation of the community:

> The liberty of the individual is no gift of civilization […].The development of civilization imposes restrictions on it, and justice demands that no one shall escape those restrictions. What makes itself felt in a human community as a desire for freedom may […] spring from the remains of their original personality, which is still untamed by civilization and may thus become the basis in them of hostility to civilization. The urge for freedom, therefore, is directed against particular forms and demands of civilization or against civilization altogether. It does not seem as though any influence could induce a man to change his nature into a termite's. No doubt he will always defend his claim to individual liberty against the will of the group. (Freud 284-85)

Freud's reasoning about the intrinsic incompatibility between civilization and the individual's liberty implies us that though the development of culture is obliged to curtail the animalism of humanity, it is far from eliminated. On the contrary, the civilized man's claim for freedom is granted with more convincing validity and succeeds in triggering one's revolt against civilization, when freedom means to unfetter one's instinctive desires.

Freud's essay makes manifest the paradoxical quests that lie in the history of civilization: the quest for the fulfillment of desires and the quest for the control of desires. The permanent struggle between nature and culture is, however, disrupted when war brings civilization to the verge of annihilation. As war disavows the "portion of security" (Freud 306) man barters his aggressive instinct for, his carnal passions become unbridled. Moreover, the barbarian side of human nature becomes more prominent when gluttony overtakes people who survive the war.

Zhang observes that, after the war came to an end, people in Hong Kong were seething with covetousness for food:

> Hong Kong discovered anew the joy of eating. Strange how the most natural, the most fundamental of functions, when suddenly accorded excessive attention and subjected to the glare of intense emotion, can come to seem sordid and even perverse. In Hong Kong after the battle, there were people every five or ten paces along the sidewalks, dressed in the immaculate fashion of those employed by foreign firms, squatting by little stoves cooking yellow biscuits that were as hard as iron [...]. Because of the shortage of petrol, garages were turned into restaurants, and you could hardly find a silk shop or a medicine shop that wasn't selling pastries on

> the side. Hong Kong had never before been so gluttonous. The students in the dormitory talked of nothing the whole day except food. (*Written on Water* 46-47)

No other circumstance than war exposes more ruthlessly the instinctive crudeness of human beings, which further introduces to us Freud's proposition that "hunger and love" stand for the most essential needs of humanity. "Hunger could be taken to represent the instincts which aim at preserving the individual; while love strives after objects, and its chief function, favoured in every way by nature, is the preservation of the species" (308).

Zhang's schoolmates, imprisoned in the purgatory of imminent death and stripped of the embroidery of education and cultivation, preoccupy their minds only with the appetite for food and for libido:

> When the war broke out, most Hong Kong University students were overjoyed, because December 8 also happened to be the first day of exams, and to be excused from exams for no reason was an almost unprecedented godsend. That winter, we suffered through a fair amount of hardship and through these trials gained a better sense of our priorities. But priorities are difficult to define [...]. Students from overseas, stranded in one spot with nothing at all to do, spent their days grocery shopping, cooking, and flirting [...].In the dormitories after the war, a male student might lie on a girl's bed playing cards deep into the night and then come back the very next morning before she had even awoken and sit himself right back down on the edge of the bed. From next door, one could hear her coy cries of "No! Didn't I say no? No, I will not" and so on until she was dressed. This

> sort of phenomenon produced different reactions in different people and may even have compelled some of us to retreat in horror to Confucius' side. In the end, one cannot dispense with restrictions. Primitive people may well have had a certain innocence, but, in the final analysis, they weren't completely human, either. (*Written on Water* 51)

The reports of students idling their youth away by indulging in the entertainments of "shopping, cooking and flirting" reminds us of Zhang's persistent notice of the "trivial things" in war, which, at the end of the passage, evolves into a serious interrogation of the value of civilization. The dilemma she deals with here is that even if civilization fails to disentangle modern people from their primitive cravings for food and sex, those who are shorn of the breeding of civilization are nothing less than beasts. The war has made known to Zhang the same issue which also preoccupied Freud, "the irremediable antagonism between the demands of instincts and the restrictions of civilization" (editor's introduction in Freud, 246). But a more persecuting fact is that people would rather continue to vacillate between the order and disorder of their instincts than relieve themselves from this difficult choice, because civilization is awarded its irresistible luster by confirming people's humanity.

To parallel the work of Freud with that of Zhang highlights their affinities concerning the innate paradox which keeps recurring during the development of civilization. The paradox seems too inextricable to be resolved. Nevertheless, in her essay "Tan Nüren" 談女人 (Speaking of Women), Zhang labels civilization as the performance of men's intelligence, and argues that the stalemate which imprisons people between savagery and civilization would be allowed a valid solution if we invite women to speculate on and consult about the issue:

> Some people say that, in their tenure as masters of the world, men have made a muddle of things. It would be better, runs this line of argument, if they would simply come clean and cede their position to women [...]. The absurd notion that if women were allowed to rule the land, they would bring peace to all under heaven [...] does in fact have some basis in science [...]. Advanced civilization, with its highly developed means of training and repression, doubtless takes its toll on our primitive vitality. Women have often been dismissed as savages or primitives. Mankind has tamed and subordinated the birds and beasts but has somehow been unable to tame women. For several thousands of years, women have always remained outside the compass of civilization. How are we to be certain that they haven't been conserving the primitive vitality in patient preparation for the next big step forward? (*Written on Water* 86-87)

It is suggested that women are marginalized by men's civilization, thus retaining the "primitive vitality" which incubates the potential of overthrowing men's regime. But how do we account for the instincts that, once devaluated as the beastly natures of human beings, are ennobled here as the dynamic energy which evokes our nostalgic dreams for the simple life immune from the pollution of civilization?

In the same essay, Zhang refers to Nietzsche's idea of the superman and touches on its aloof and unattainable image. However, what actually exudes from her comments on Nietzsche is her praise for the humble and practical attributes of women that intone the rhythm of nature:

> The term "superman" derives from the work of Nietzsche and is frequently invoked. [...] Strangely enough, the superman always appears in our

> mind's eyes as a man. Why should this be? In all likelihood, because the civilization of the superman has made progress beyond our own, and our own civilization is male. There's another level here: the superman is the culmination of an ideal, while we can actually locate superior women in reality. No matter what stage of cultural development we reach, a woman always remains a woman. Men strive toward one sort of advance or another, while women remain the same: basic, fundamental, emblematic of the cycle of the seasons, of the earth, of birth, growth, sickness, and death, of eating and reproducing. Women bind the soaring, errant souls of mankind to the solid trunk of reality. (*Written on Water* 88)

Zhang is most emphatic on the amicability of femininity. She proposes that while the ideal of men's civilization is too much a celestial goal to be carried out in reality, women live out the routines of life we are most familiar with. On the one hand, Zhang suggests that women are capable of integrating into civilization the primordial force of human beings. On the other, she implies that when history comes to its devastating end, what still tolls our memory of civilization is the cycling of "birth, growth, sickness, and death" women put themselves in. Only with the recollection of the permanent "cycle of the seasons" can people feel soothed and reassured when, in the face of the desolation left by the transient sojourn of culture, they are completely disillusioned and bereft.

In Eugene O'Neill's play *The Great God Brown*, Zhang discovers the image of the Mother Earth who radiates the warmth that heals the wounds caused by the callous replacement of life for death:

> After someone dies, she says to herself: "What's the good of bearing

> children? What's the use of giving birth to death?" She also says: "Always spring comes again bearing life! Always again! Always, always forever again!—Spring again!—Life again!—summer and fall and peace again!—(*with agonized sorrow*)—but always, always, love and conception and birth and pain again—spring bearing the eternal chalice of life again!—(*then with agonized exultance*)—bearing the glorious, blazing crown of life again! (*She stands like an idol of Earth, her eyes staring out over the world*)." This, finally, is a real goddess. (*Written on Water* 89-90)

Being able to reproduce life is a heavenly gift endowed upon women. Death, therefore, becomes less tormenting since spring will come again to sprout the new leaf of another life. The images of women, in Zhang's writings, are vested both with the fortitude to endure the demolition of civilization and the strength to vivify the perishing land.

The preface is interrupted when the story of the *bengbeng* opera comes to a sudden end and is ensued by the depiction of a comedy totally irrelevant to it. The female character in this play, however, shows the tenacity and toughness that demonstrates the inexhaustible effluence of the vitality of women:

> Before the main play, there was also a short comic sketch about a woman who manages to kill her own husband. Two huge streaks of rouge drooped down across this lascivious woman's broad cheeks. Even the sides of her nose were covered with rouge, so that only a narrow strip of powdery white nose remained. This contrivance—aimed toward creating the impression of a high, narrow, and aquiline Greek nose—just didn't fit the width of her face. Her teary eyes seemed to be located on the side of her

> face, like an animal's. She had a gold tooth, two long, greasy braids dangling almost to her ankles, and from under the sleeves of her pink blouse, you could catch a glimpse of her plump, copper-colored wrists. (*Written on Water* 201)

Readers can trace the connection between the image of this woman and that of Mother Earth. The goddess is embodied in "a prostitute" who is "a strong, calm, sensual, blonde girl of twenty or so, her complexion fresh and healthy, her figure full-breasted and wide-hipped, her movements slow and solidly languorous like an animal's, her large eyes dreamy with the reflected stirring of profound instincts" (*Written on Water* 89). Both women feature their full and fleshy bodies. A reverie of their voluptuous curves will fuel the fire of carnal desires, the libido that ensures the continuation of the human race. Moreover, the countenance of the comedy actress and the movements of the prostitute deliver an air resembling that of the animal, and the animal features allude to the primal natures which, besieged by civilization, are secured by women.

The story of the comic play staged before the *bengbeng* opera is about the "grieved spirit" of the woman's husband who "lodges a complaint with the authorities" (*Written on Water* 201), and the interrogation about the murder befalls her:

> She kneels in front of the officer as she explains how it came to be that her husband came home to her one night, fell suddenly ill, and died. She tries a hundred different circumlocutions in order to get her meaning across. And still he doesn't understand. She sings: "Your honour! Did you ever see a stove without a fire? Did you ever see a chimney without smoke?" The

> audience cheers. (*Written on Water* 201)

Apparently, the woman fails to establish her innocence. However, what leaves the readers in bewilderment are her responses to the officer's incredulity, which seems totally unallied with the inquisition. It is even more baffling when the audience applauds for it. But when she refers to the flaming stove and the smoking chimney, we can detect the sense of domesticity registered in her words. A rather plausible interpretation of this puzzling paragraph is that the woman refers to the daily chores of cooking as a defense: the cause of her husband's death is mundane household trifles. Since there is nothing inscrutable in her explanation, the officers' incomprehension should be the result of a deliberate attempt to put her in a quandary. The audience claps for her boldness and shrewdness in confronting the authorities.

What transpires in this play is the struggle and strength of a woman, and her strength, in trying to overcome the adversities in life, and who, as Zhang defines in the following passage, epitomizes the unique grit and robustness that see her through the crumbling civilization:

> Women who manage to get the upper hand in barren and backward country aren't actually much like the wild roses most people imagine them to be, with dark, flashing eyes, even stronger than a man, brandishing a horsewhip in one hand and willing to use it at the slightest provocation. That's just an image city dwellers have made up to satisfy their need for titillation. In the barren waste of the future, among the broken tiles and rubble of the ruins, the only sort of woman left will be like the singers in *bengbeng* opera, who are always able to find a way to survive safe and sound, no matter in which era and no matter in what kind of society; their

> home is everywhere. That is why I felt such great sorrow. Perhaps it's because of H.G. Wells' prognostications that I often think of things like this. I used to think they lay very far in the future, but now they don't seem so very distant at all. And yet it's autumn now, as clear as water and as bright as a mirror, and I should be happy. (*Written on Water* 201)

The account of seeing the *bengbeng* opera functions to "unroll the sketchy blueprints of an uncivilized and desolate world that might come out in the future, the world that might come to pass, was a world she 'used to think' lay 'far in the future', but now it doesn't 'seem so very distant at all'" (J. Zhang 196). The premonition of inevitable devastation haunts the preface. However, the last sentence of it is still sprinkled with drops of an obscure optimism. The uncertain happiness brought forth by a clear and crisp autumn becomes the afterglow, the luster of which will soon be shadowed by the imminent doom of civilization. Women as sturdy as the singers of *bengbeng* opera can always manage to live, but live only to witness the desolation of the "barren waste of the future." Thus, what contributes to Zhang's "great sorrow" is the realization that because women "are so well grounded in real life, they are given all the agony and pathos of life in their pursuit of happiness" (Lee 280). Their resilience causes so much pain because their strenuous survival stands on the shambles which reminds us of the deterioration of human history and the downfall of civilization.

The preface to *Chuanqi* registers the sense of desolation which derives from Zhang's panic and helplessness about the devastation of civilization. But what further confirms her pessimism is to perceive how human beings are torn between the demands of their desires and the restrictions of civilization. Nevertheless, it is implied that marginalized women have preserved the raw vitality with which they can defend against the corruption of civilization. The idea of desolation and Zhang's feminist concerns, interfaced in this preface, thus inspired me to probe into the permanent conflict between desires and civilization, which will be the main stream that flows through the following three chapters.

## Method of Study and Organization

While the first three chapters of the thesis are organized as dialogues between literary theories and Zhang's stories, the fourth chapter ponders on the possible connotations held in the epilogue to *Chuanqi*. It aims to explicate how civilization, on the brink of destruction and annihilation, also takes on the psychology of decadence, and how a decadent mind actually reflects Zhang's obsession with China.

The first chapter, the subject of which is an extension of one of the keynotes in the preface, deals with the feminist concerns in *Chuanqi*. The French feminist, Luce Irigaray, believes that human culture is the projection of the patriarchal values and the identities of women only mirror men's desires. Irigaray's postulation helps us to speculate on different definitions of femininity, and to figure out how the female characters in *Chuanqi* strive to meet the requirements of men. While they try to assimilate themselves into the desires of man in order to survive in a phallocentric civilization, how do they tackle their own desires? And how do their repressed desires and twisted psychologies lead to their tragedies that also implicate men?

In chapter two, men's struggle in civilization becomes the focus of my study. Lacan's concept about the disjunction between the signifier and the signified inspires my choice of research on the relation between desires and disillusions. I formulated the hypothesis that characters transfer their desires into signifiers which would be imposed upon people around them. However, since there is an inevitable rupture between the signifier and the signified, the characters' expectations of fulfilling their desires are never satisfied, because people do not act in accordance with the signifiers they are tagged to. While fantasies still allow the dreams to come true in people's minds, civilization only grudges a reality in which desires are destined to be disillusioned.

The theme of chapter three dwells on the sufferings of both men and women, caused by the lack of their mutual understanding. As Bakhtin argues that languages transmit each individual's thoughts, discourses in novels therefore function to shape the characters' ideologies, which, in *Chuanqi*, spell out different interpretations of life and spark off suspicions and strife among people. With the settings of most of her stories located either in Hong Kong or in Shanghai, the emblems of metropolises, Zhang depicts urbanites who find it difficult to communicate with one another. However, people cramped in the narrow space of a city must cope with the network of relationships, one of the elements of our culture that demands frequent interactions. But the dialogue among people only frustrates them as one's view, given the fact that one is always self-involved, is always incompatible with that of another. The desire to guard one's interests, therefore, contradicts the requirements of a sociable life. Moreover, the inharmonious relationships among characters also introduces us to the essence of the Chinese religion, on which Zhang writes an essay to propose that the faith of the Chinese is actually all about relationships.

Chapter four carries out an exploration of the epilogue to *Chuanqi*. The main arguments are based on my interpretation of Zhang's obsession with China, which is charged with the mind-set of decadence. In the epilogue, civilization is not confronted with inevitable extinction but goes on a long journey of continuous decline that also alludes to the history of China. If civilization savors desolation, people are just too deeply lodged in it to extricate themselves from the quagmire of modern life. By the same token, Zhang develops the decadent complex as she, though aware of the squalidness of Chinese society, finds herself emotionally indebted to it. Thus, rather than level castigations against it, she, instead, indulges herself in the decay of Chinese civilization.

This thesis, as it is noted in the conclusion, adopts Freud's concern about civilization and its discontents to trace the intrinsic clashes between civilization and the instinctive drives of human beings. While *Chuanqi* is taken as the microcosm of the civilized world, the studies of these stories show the pain of characters struggling to seek the balance between the liberation of their desires and the discipline of civilization. The sense of desolation that lingers in Zhang's work implies that, when desires are stifled, civilization becomes a wasteland, and people living in this spiritual wasteland can only defend themselves against the barrenness by occupying themselves with the mundane affairs of modern life.

### What I Want to Achieve

The story of this thesis begins with my intention to define the world in *Chuanqi*. It is, however, more than obvious that the academia of Chinese literature is already brimming with books about Zhang Ailing and her fiction, not to mention the countless essays relevant to the study of *Chuanqi*. But for many years, I have never come across a learned work which provides a view that connects all the short stories in this collection. Many critics prefer to adopt a literary theory to survey most of Zhang's writings. Other arguments concerning *Chuanqi* are scattered on the analyses of the characters, symbols, ironies, or the aesthetics incurred from the readings of the stories. The research on *Chuanqi* is like a kaleidoscope where a variety of interpretations are paraded but none of them name a core value that could be applied to every story in this book.

Taking *Chuanqi* as a display of the misfortunes that befall different people, I want to find out an answer which will explain how all these tragedies take shape. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to give a full coverage to Zhang's lifetime works. Neither do I attempt to offer conclusive pronouncements of the writer's perspective on life. The goal of my research is to give an original contribution to the study of *Chuanqi*, in a way that this short story collection can be read as a consistent portrayal of the tragic flaw which accounts for the miseries of all the characters. My argument is developed through the examinations of the sufferings of both men and women and finally claims that it is the irreconcilable conflict between desires and human civilization that lead to all the tragedies in *Chuanqi*. Moreover, to juxtapose Zhang's stories and the theories, on the one hand, shows Zhang often pre-empts ideas that the theorists would formulate later. On the other, the theoretical reading of *Chuanqi* that aims to introduce into this thesis an interflow between Chinese and western texts will reach the conclusion which demonstrates how the themes of desolation and civilization are displayed both in *Chuanqi* and in the poem, "The Waste Land," by T.S. Eliot.

# Chapter One

## A Feminist Reading of *Chuanqi*

In this chapter, I apply the theories of the French feminist, Luce Irigaray, to the study of women in *Chuanqi*. My argument is grounded on Irigaray's assumption that our society is a patriarchal one in which the images of women are the projections of men's desires. Accordingly, women are grouped under the categories of three roles: prostitutes, mothers and virgins. Each of them marks the different characteristics of women.

Prostitution is connected to fetishist women who are obsessed with commodities. They then adorn themselves with these commodities in order to seduce men and enter into a relationship of matrimony (read: financial security). Mothers carry out the functions of reproduction and nurturance, while virgins stand for men's emphasis on the chastity of women.

The contents of section three, four and five are devoted to the explorations and discussions of women in *Chuanqi* whose personalities can be subsumed under these three roles. In the course of section six, I will argue that though women try to fulfill men's desires by living up to these images, it is actually women's desires for men's love which subjugate them under male dominance.

The conclusion of this chapter deals with a comparison between Zhang Ailing and Luce Irigaray. On the one hand, I will demonstrate that both women try to mock male discourse by miming it. On the other, it is unavoidable to see how Zhang is differentiated from Irigaray when we shine the spotlight on Zhang's indulgence in submissiveness.

## 1. The Homosexual Society and the Performance of Gender

In her book, S*peculum of the Other Woman*, Irigaray takes a feminist reading of Freud and claims that the images of women are reflective of men's desires. Moreover, patriarchal values can be delivered only through languages (Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One* 193). As a result, women, linguistically absent, are lacking of all representation, and find no possible way to voice their libidos. They can only define themselves with a language produced and authorized by men. It turns out that men speak on behalf of the feminine, and "female sexuality has always been conceptualized on the basis of masculine parameters" (Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One* 23). Therefore, women are speaking the desire conceived and mimicked by men and that desire is approved by the law-bound discourse of men's desires (Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman* 42). Our society is both a phallocentric one where "all others are positively or negatively defined" by men, and a homosexual one where "a phallic economy, an economy based on sameness, oneness or identity with the masculine subject" leads to a "cultural and representational *assimilation*" (Grosz, *Sexual Subversions* 105) of the archetypes of men's desires.

As the "man-father will be the guarantor of the *systems of representation, ideals, public spirit, the practice of law*" (Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman* 96), femininity can only be defined and represented as the foil to masculinity. Female subjectivity, as Toril Moi notices, is the "'acceptable' form as man's specularized Other'" (134). With their subjectivities determined by men, "woman, in this sexual imaginary, is only a more or less obliging prop for the enactment of man's fantasies" (Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One* 25).

Women recognize their identities according to the masculine definition of femininity. Hence, to see how the idea of femininity is practiced is to speculate on how women conform to the images designated by men. In addition, a woman will mimic the feminine images “so perfectly as to forget she is acting out man’s contraphobic projects, projections, and productions of her desire” (Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman* 53). Consequently, “there is no gender identity behind the expression of gender,” and our identities are “performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (Butler, “Subjects of Sex/ Gender/ Desire” 285). Gender, therefore, is not an attribute of sexuality but rather a production of culture and a performance. The notion of gender as a performance also refers to the idea of “masquerade.” Butler suggests that “masquerade may be understood as the performative production of a sexual ontology, an appearing that makes itself convincing as a ‘being.’” Therefore, “all gender ontology is reducible to the play of appearances” (*Gender Trouble* 47).

Yang Ze 楊澤 then combines the concepts of performance and masquerade and argues that:

> Zhang Ailing understands how much the performance matters in life—especially the complicated performances of “femininity and womanliness,” which are nothing more than the masks of gender. To be more exact, they are the “masquerades” of gender accepted and recognized in a patriarchal society.” (10)

Accordingly, women in *Chuanqi* can be taken as Zhang’s display and mockery of the ideal femininity derived from men’s perspectives. The portrayals of these female characters involve the writer’s intention to debunk the masquerade of gender plays. Thus, in this thesis, the feminist reading of *Chuanqi* carries out the exploration of the masquerade of femininity the female protagonists strive to live up to, especially with respect to the functions of the three roles imposed upon women mentioned above.

## 2. Three Roles of Women

The roles designed for women are derived from their market values. As Irigaray remarks, "the society we know, our own culture, is based upon the exchange of women" and "all the systems of exchange that organize patriarchal societies and all the modalities of productive work that are recognized, valued and rewarded in these societies are men's business" (*This Sex Which is Not One* 170, 171). In this business, "*what is required of a 'normal' feminine sexuality is oddly evocative of the character of the status of a commodity*" (*This Sex Which is Not One* 187). In other words, women are compared to commodities whose value depends on their usefulness. Thus, as far as the utility of a female body is concerned, there are three social roles that claim the service of women:

> *Mother, virgin, prostitute: these are the social roles imposed on women.* The characteristics of (so-called) feminine sexuality derive from them: the valorization of reproduction and nursing; faithfulness; modesty, ignorance of and even lack of interest in sexual pleasure; a passive acceptance of men's "activity"; seductiveness, in order to arouse the consumers' desire while offering herself as its material support without getting pleasure herself. (Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One* 186-87)

Grosz's interpretation of Irigaray informs us that once women have succumbed to the roles imposed upon them, they have to "develop several specifically 'feminine' characteristics," one of which is "the acquisition of the skills of seduction and the traits of narcissism, masochism and exhibitionism" (*Sexual Subversions* 108). Narcissism and exhibitionism pertain to the psychology of a woman who has a fixation about her body and would strain to parade the beauty of it. The combination of the mentalities of a narcissist and an exhibitionist produce women fetishists who, with the attempt to be attractive and seductive so that they can "arouse the consumers' desire" and sell themselves to men, are captured by the fascination with commodities for adornment. In *Chuanqi*, women who get married for money are those who transform themselves into commodities. The materialist nature of their marriages thus equates them with the prostitutes who sell their bodies to earn a living.

Mothers are expected to hold the functions of "reproduction and nursing," which assign them the duty of raising children but disenchant the charm of femininity that spellbinds men. In *Chuanqi*, women, instigated by their cravings for men's love, become the masochistic and sadistic mothers who are turned into the rivals of their daughters. Virgins, unconsumed commodities, serve as a diametrical opposition to prostitutes, the repeatedly consumed products. A virginal girl "is a simple envelope veiling what is really at stake in social exchange." Therefore, to have sex with a virgin is to tear open the envelope, "the hymen, which has taken the value of taboo, the taboo of virginity" (Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One* 186). In *Chuanqi*, the concern of virginity brings forth the image of child-women, women who are as pure and chaste as children. Ignorant of sex, the child-women display the traits of "lack of interest in sexual pleasure" and "a passive acceptance of man's 'activity'" as pointed out by Irigaray.

The three social roles of women proposed by Irigaray find their counterparts in *Chuanqi*. The application of Irigaray's theories to the study of Zhang's short stories, therefore, will be based on the juxtaposition and comparison between prostitutes/fetishists, mothers/masochists and sadists, and virgins/child-women. Women of different roles, however, are in concert when it comes to their desires for men's love. Being recognized and completed when crowned by men's love, women become the devotees whose worshipping of men's love not only reveal a religious passion but also transform men into a figurative God, the total omniscience of which reminds us of Irigaray's view about how the cognition of femininity is determined by the perspectives of men.

### 3. Fetishism, Marriage and Prostitution

In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir explains how the idea of femininity affects a woman's adolescence. When the concept that "the supreme necessity for woman is to charm a masculine heart" is ingrained in the mind of a young girl, she is persuaded that "no quality is asked of them other than their beauty" (318-19). As long as her attractiveness remains at the highest level of her concern, her self-esteem will also be indebted to her appearance. To indulge themselves in commodities such as dresses, cosmetics, accessories and jewelry, on the one hand, reflect women's eager need for the adornment of themselves. On the other, the indulgence develops into the fetishism of commodities, and the narcissism of their bodies. Elizabeth Grosz argues that there is a close relation between female fetishism and narcissism:

> The girl may develop a narcissistic investment in her own body, treating it as the corresponding male would an external love object. She pampers her body, treats it with loving care; it becomes her greatest asset; it is her means of ensuring that she is loved, and thus of giving her some notion of her own self-worth [...].
>
> [...] She devotes loving time and energy to the images she has for others. She paints/shaves/plucks/dyes/diets/exercises her body, and clearly derives pleasures from compliments about her looks. ("Lesbian Fetishism?" 110-

11)

As de Beauvoir notices, "man encourages these allurements by demanding to be lured," and "since woman's fate is in men's hands, she commonly measures her success by the number and worth of the men she attracts to her train" (381, 651). Furthermore, "it is through the eyes of men" that women discover "the world and read therein [their] destiny" (de Beauvoir 316). Thus, women who are narcissistic about their own looks are convinced that beauty is entailed by the appreciation and courtship of men, which will earn them high self-esteem.

To be fetishistic, for women, is a way to maintain their attractiveness to men. They are required by the fetishistic need for commodities to decorate themselves as desirable commodities for the purpose of drawing the male gaze. According to Zhang Xiaohong 張小虹, this is an important transformation from " women's commodity fetishism to women-as-commodity fetishism" (183). Female fetishism is thus the result of the "valorization of men's needs/desires" (Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One* 171). It is from the attention of men that women learn the meanings of their lives, and it is in the eyes of men that women become the objects of men's desires. "Allowing herself to be an object, she is transformed into an idol proudly recognizing herself as such [...]. She is proud of catching male interest, of arousing admiration" (de Beauvoir 373).

As the commodities that fulfill men's desires, women are seldom blamed for their "physical vanity" (Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman* 114). Their values are increased by outshining other commodities, because "the worth of merchandise declines when it becomes too common" (de Beauvoir 382). This explains why a woman strains to become a peerless and precious belle. Eager to parade her physical beauty, she always expects the praising of her looks by men. Narcissistic about her appearance, she considers herself to be the "Venus bestowing upon the world the treasures of her beauty" (de Beauvoir 646).

In *Chuanqi,* woman fetishism is usually connected to the concern over the financial security a husband can provide. The purpose of adornment for women fetishists, therefore, is to sell themselves in the marriage market. The relation between fetishism and marriage explains the situation the protagonist Ah Fang 阿芳 faces in "Waiting"[1]:

> Ah Fang was tall and strong. Her front teeth protruded a little. Her face was as flat and round as a pan. But her eyes were smiling, and the pupils were black and shining. Day after day, she always wore a red and black checkered robe which was too large and slack for her figure. On her feet was a pair of grey homemade sneakers. Ah Fang had many siblings. If she wanted to make beautiful dresses, the prerequisite was that she had to have someone to date. But if she did not dress herself well, no one would ask her for a date. Ah Fang was trapped in this vicious circle of waiting, and, most of the time, in her almond-shaped eyes there was anger. No matter how competent a girl was, she could never extend her life beyond the reach of her costumes. (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 5,* 101)

Not a striking beauty, Ah Fang has to be nicely dressed if she wants to impress men. But if no one is attracted to her, she would not be qualified to buy the beautiful clothes. Stranded in this vicious circle, Ah Fang can only voice her discontent through the sparks of anger in her eyes.

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[1] All translations are my own unless otherwise noted. For the published English translations of Zhang Ailing's works, see *Traces of Love*, edited by Eva Hung, the special issue of *Rendition*, No.45, edited by Eva Hung and D.E. Pollard, and *Modern Chinese Stories and Novellas*, edited by Joseph S. M. Lau, C. T. Hsia, and Leo Ou-Fan Lee.

In her essay, "Speaking of Women," Zhang leads the discussion about how women prostitute themselves when they enter into marriage out of the concern for money:

> A woman may win favor in any number of different ways. [...]
>
> Winning favor by means of a beautiful body is the oldest profession in the world and indeed the most common job description for women, because every woman who marries for economic reasons is included in this category. And there's really no need for recrimination. Those who have beautiful bodies please with their bodies, and those with beautiful thoughts please with their thoughts; it makes very little difference in the end. (*Written on Water* 90)

Zhang's comments are warranted as de Beauvoir also claims that "the nature of marriage, as well as the existence of prostitutes, is the *proof*: woman *gives herself*, man pays her and takes her" (396). Irigaray, as well, asserts the relation between marriage and prostitution as she remarks that "the marriage contract will also have disguised *a purchase agreement for the body and sex of the wife*" (*Speculum of the Other Woman* 121). The parallel between the words by Zhang, de Beauvoir and Irigaray helps to confirm the idea that the fetishist woman, married with mercenary intentions, has assumed the social roles of prostitutes.

In "Love in a Fallen City," when the licentious man, Fan Liuyuan 范柳原 describes marriage as a "long-term prostitution" (trans. by Karen Kingsbury, in A. Zhang, "Love in a Fallen City" 216), his sharp remarks actually mock the mentality of women who take marriage as a *changqi fanpiao* 長期飯票 (long-term meal ticket). Bai Baoluo 白寶絡, one of the girls who is trying to get her meal ticket in this story, has a meeting arranged with Liuyuan. Before she leaves for the date, the whole Bai family puts in a great deal of effort to deck her out in splendid attire:

> Old Mrs. Bai was not satisfied until she had dressed Baoluo in every last stitch of the family's best finery. Third Mistress's daughter had received a length of silk as a birthday present from her godmother. Old Mrs. Bai forced Third Mistress to hand it over, and then she had it made into a cheongsam for Baoluo. The old lady's private cache of fine goods consisted mostly of furs, and since furs couldn't be worn in the summertime, she had to pawn a sable jacket, then use the money to have several old pieces of jewelry redesigned. Of course Baoluo was also given pearl earrings, jade bracelets and emerald rings to wear. Everyone wanted to make sure she was fully adorned, a glittering beauty. ("Love in a Fallen City" 68)

Baoluo, like a Christmas tree, is adorned with abundant commodities which transform her into another commodity, waiting for Fan's bid.

However, she is overshadowed by her aunt, Bai Liusu 白流蘇, a twenty-eight year old divorcee who accompanies her on the date and wins Liuyuan's favor. At the beginning, Bai Liusu is considered a parasite in her family. But she soon realizes her value increases after a man is attracted to her. "She knew that even though Baoluo hated her, there was also admiration and respect. It doesn't matter how great a woman is; if she can't get the love of a man, she can't get the respect of other women. Women are petty this way" ("Love in a Fallen City" 70). Bearing the scorn and resentment from her own family for a long time, Bai Liusu finally takes her revenge by marrying Fan Liuyuan, a prodigal man who is hardly willing to give in to matrimony. By outrivaling Baoluo, she succeeds in raising her price as a commodity on the marriage market.

In "The Golden Cangue," Jiang Chang'an 姜長安, before going to have dinner with Tong Shifang 童世舫, the man she is later engaged to, is busy decorating herself with the aid of her cousin, Changxin 長馨:

> On the day of the dinner, Chang-hsing [Changxin] accompanied her in the late afternoon to see the hairdresser, who waved her hair with hot tongs and plastered close-set little kiss-curls from the temple to the ears. Upon returning home, Chang-hsing made her cousin wear "glassy-green" jadeite earrings with pagoda-shaped pendants two inches long and changed into an apple-green georgette gown with a high collar, ruffled sleeves, and fine pleats below the waist half Western style. As a young maid squatted on the floor buttoning her up, Ch'ang-an [Chang'an] scrutinized herself in the wardrobe mirror and could not help stretching out both arms and kicking out the skirt in a posture from "The Grape Fairy." Twisting her head around, she started to laugh, saying, "Really dolled up to look like the celestial maiden scattering flowers!" (trans. by Zhang Ailing, in "The Golden Cangue" 552)

The detailed descriptions of Chang'an's dressing demonstrate not only her fetishist desires for commodities but also her identity as a commodity. Being well decorated, Chang'an is satisfied with her look as if she is a charming fairy. Like a gift wrapped with dazzling papers, she is fully prepared for the examination by her buyer.

Chang'an becomes a shy and quiet girl in the presence of Shifang. Timid and reserved, she authorizes her decorations to speak for her:

> Ch'ang-an was still in good spirits in the car, talking and laughing away. But once in the restaurant, she suddenly became reserved, stealing into the room behind Chang-hsing, timidly removed her apple-green ostrich cape, and sat down with bowed head, took an almond and bit off a tenth of it every two minutes, chewing slowly. She had come to be looked at. She felt that her costume was impeccable and could stand scrutiny [...]. ("The Golden Cangue" 552)

Chang'an is conscious of her role as the "dolled up" girl under the survey of men. As a result, "Shih-fang, who had not seen any girls of his homeland for many years was struck by Ch'ang-an's pathetic charm and rather liked it" ("The Golden Cangue" 553). Whether they are successful in arousing the buyer's interests, Baoluo and Chang'an are "commodities produced by a pile of other commodities (pearl earrings, jade bracelets, green diamond rings) [...]. They want to achieve nothing but sell themselves in the arranged meetings with men, where they are put in the positions of commodities" (Zhang Xiaohong 189-190).

Women are further trapped in fetishism before their marriages. In "Great Felicity," Yuqing 玉清 takes the opportunity of purchasing her trousseau to satisfy her fetishist desires:

> Yuqing had also bought a satin embroidered night-dress, a matching embroidered robe, a silk padded morning gown, embroidered padded slippers, a *cloisonné* compact and a purse mirror with its own zippered

> suede cover. She believed that a woman only had one chance in her life to indulge herself, and she should make the most of it. Whatever she saw, she bought, as if there was no tomorrow. There was a kind of valediction and desolation in her heart. Her sadness as she shopped for her trousseau was not entirely put on. (trans. by Janet Ng with Janice Wickeri , in *Traces of Love* 103)

Marriage will bring a closure to women's fetishist indulgence, since a married woman is no longer in need of commodities for adornment. Buying her trousseau is the last chance to relish materialistic pleasures. Yuqing's sisters-in-law are also aware that as soon as she is married, her fetishist life also comes to an end, while they are about to enjoy the adventure of a shopping spree. Therefore, for them, "Yuqing was the dazzling white caption to appear on the silver screen at the end of a movie—'The End,' while they were the exciting previews for the 'Next Change'" (*Traces of Love* 103). For Yuqing, to stack up commodities is to lament the disappearing days of being a fetishist.

Women who fail to sell themselves will end up as a worthless commodity. In "A Wilted Flower," Zheng Chuanchang 鄭川嫦, soon after meeting the doctor Zhang Yunfan 章雲藩, has started to dream of marrying him. However, she falls ill with tuberculosis after their first two dates. Her beauty gradually fades away like a wilted flower. All her expectations for the future become illusions. Chuanchang realizes she is only a burden for the world:

> This world was like a festivity full of pleasant things—commodities exhibited behind the windows, names of dishes listed on the menu, pictures of clothes in fashion magazines and a room boasting of its artistic

> inner design. It would be an empty room furnished only with huge French windows, the top of which would reach the ceiling. There would also be colorful carpets and cushions. And babies. Of course, she wanted a baby wrapped in furry clothes, a baby who was dressed in a tiny jacket with a hood and two rabbit ears, a baby who looked like the ones printed on Christmas cards. When the baby cried, she could ask the nanny to take care of it.
>
> Chuanchang was one of these lovely things. If people wanted her, she would also get what she wanted. She had already taken this for granted. However, now, she was dying inch by inch, and the lovely world also vanished inch by inch. Everything that her gaze fell upon and her fingers touched would die right away. If she did not exist, the world would not exist either. (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 6,* 219-20)

Chuanchang equates herself to the material world around her. She was once one of the desirable commodities. But as her beauty is ruined by illness, her value dwindles away. The world of merchandise also perishes with her impending death.

In "The Glazed Tiles," Mr. Yao 姚先生 marries his seven beautiful daughters as if he is selling commodities. The relatives of Mr. Yao make fun of his wife's fertility by calling his house the "factory of tiles," since in general Chinese parents value sons more than daughters, and daughters are as cheap as tiles. But Mr. Yao, caring little about the tease, replies with complacence: "the tiles produced in our factory are distinguished ones, which ordinary tiles cannot rival. They are glazed tiles" (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 6,* 128). For Mr. and Mrs. Yao, their beautiful daughters are the most valuable products in the marriage market. As the narrator comments, "daughters were the burdens of a family. They were unprofitable products. But beautiful daughters were always the exception. Mr. Yao understood quite well the way the world worked" (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 6,* 128).

Mr. Yao formulates detailed plans for marrying his daughters. The eldest one, Jingjing 靜靜, regardless of her unwillingness, is married to the only son of a family which runs a printing enterprise. Mr. Yao thinks of getting a job in the printing factory after the marriage. However, Jingjing detests the gossip which links her marriage to her father's intention of nepotism, and thus deliberately distances herself from her parents. Mr.Yao's "first deal" simply fails. His second daughter, Ququ 曲曲, is much more willful and undisciplined than Jingjing and will by no means conform to the marriage arranged by her father. Ququ falls in love with a man who cannot earn enough money to support a family. As a result, Mr. Yao has to pay for all the expenses of their marriage and still keeps financing her afterwards. Mr. Yao only "begged her to leave as soon as possible so that the other girls would not follow in her footsteps. Therefore, he was not in the mood to haggle over the money he had lost" (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 6,* 136) in the second deal.

The third daughter, Xinxin 心心, is well-tempered and deferential. Thus, Mr. Yao makes every endeavor to look for a proper husband for her. This time, the candidate for his third son-in-law is a young man from a rich family in Hangzhou. Mr. Yao arranges a dinner for their first meeting. Unfortunately, Xinxin is attracted to another man sitting beside the real candidate. Informed of her mistake and enraged, Mr. Yao intends to amend the mistake by arranging another date for Xinxin. However, no matter how obedient she is, Xinxin refuses to see the candidate again because, during the dinner, she is disturbed by his unsightly appearance. She accuses her father of treating her as if she is a marionette. Mr. Yao's third deal does not profit him either.

After a series of failures, Mr. Yao finally falls ill. Half-conscious, he lies in bed, while Jingjing is back home, complaining to him about her husband's extra-marital affair. She asks Mr. Yao to take full responsibility for her unhappy marriage because it is he who chose the husband for her. Ironically, she seems oblivious to the fact that she had once tried to isolate herself from her parents. Despite being confronted with this, Mr. Yao is too weak to respond anymore. Later, he recovers from the illness, but becomes rather indifferent to the other daughters' marriages. However, Mrs. Yao is pregnant again and everyone congratulates Mr. Yao as they think the eighth "glazed tile" is about to come. Nevertheless, the story ends with Mr. Yao's fear that "he might not live long" (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 6,* 142). The closure is a bitter irony which taunts Mr. Yao with his great ambition in running the business of marrying daughters. With all his deals failing one after the other, it is obvious that Mr. Yao is actually an unsuccessful merchant in the market of exchanging women. "The Glazed Tiles," thus, is a satire by which Zhang mocks the fact of women-as-commodity in a patriarchal society.

"Aloe Ashes—The First Burning" is another story in which the concept of woman fetishism is combined with the themes of marriage and prostitution. At the beginning of the story, the protagonist, Ge Weilong 葛薇龍, is "an ordinary girl from Shanghai"(*Zhang Ailing Quanji 6,* 32), who goes to Hong Kong for college and stays in her aunt's house. Her aunt, Madame Liang 梁太太, a middle-aged widow who married for money when she was young, is desperate in her quest for flirtations as her marriage begrudges her any love. She becomes a bawdy woman, turning her villa into a brothel and making use of beautiful young girls to lure the men she desires. Once entering the villa, Weilong becomes one of the prostitutes working for Madame Liang.

At the start, Weilong is confident that she can separate herself from the other girls in the house and concentrate on her studies. However, on the first night when she moves into her room, she is tempted by fine clothes in a huge wardrobe:

> As Weilong opened the wardrobe, she found it was full of dazzling garments. She was surprised and suspicious. She wondered, "Whose dresses are these? Maybe auntie just forgot to remove hers from the wardrobe." However, Weilong could not stifle her childish whims. She locked the door of the room and, sneakily, tried each of them and found they all fit her. Suddenly, she realized that all these clothes were prepared for her by her aunt. There were brocaded loungewear robes made of cambric, chiffon, or satin, coats, overcoats, beachwear capes, nightgowns, bathrobes, evening dresses, cocktail dresses, and half-formal teatime dresses for hostesses to meet guests at home. There were all sorts of dresses. How could a student need so many clothes? Weilong took off a dinner dress quickly and threw it on the bed. She went down on her knees and sat on the bed. Her face was burning and she asked herself, "Isn't it the same as if the brothel owner was buying a prostitute?" (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 6,* 47-48)

Weilong realizes that Madame Liang intends to get her trapped in the fetishist desires for garments and make her one of the prostitutes in her villa. This realization, however, does not prevent her from indulging in the pleasure of being a fetishist.

Though Weilong is aware that she is at the edge of an abyss, falling into which means to fall into a world of prostitution, she "cannot resist the lure of the wardrobe and just walks right into the trap" (Zhang Xiaohong 192):

> Weilong stayed awake for the whole night. Even when her eyes closed for a few seconds, she was still trying the garments one after another in a trance. The furry dresses were like tempting Jazz dances. The thick and heavy velvets were like melancholy classical theme songs of operas. The soft and glossy satins were like "The Blue Danube Waltz," encircling her in its cold arms and flowing all over her body. Weilong dozed off for a while. The tune of the music changed again and she was thus awakened. Downstairs, someone was playing the rumba, a panting rhythm. Weilong could not help but think of the flickering purple chiffon skirt in the wardrobe. She danced the rumba. Her legs kicked back and forth, producing the rustling sounds. ( *Zhang Ailing Quanji 6,* 48)

The descriptions of the sensuous touches of the clothes reflect the provoked desires in Weilong's heart. The materialist tantalization of the garments conquers her. No matter how firm she stands at the beginning, Weilong, like other women, is also a fetishist. With the decoration of these dresses, she is transformed into a desirable commodity.

From then on, Weilong is present at all the parties Madame Liang throws for her. For her, all these social activities are the opportunities to parade her clothes. For Madame Liang, as long as Weilong remains a rare commodity for men, she can always take her as the bait to hook the men she favors. Step by step, Weilong finds herself addicted to the materialistic life in Madame Liang's brothel and starts to struggle between her fetishist desires and her chastity. As she hesitates, Weilong falls in love with one of Madame Liang's lovers, George Qiao 喬琪喬, a womanizer and prodigal man, who dallies with women only to gain both carnal pleasures and financial support. Weilong finally gives in. She decides to seduce men for Madame

Liang if George is reasoned into marrying her. While George still casts doubts on how matrimony can benefit him, Madame Liang convinces him that Weilong will prostitute herself to provide for him. If Weilong grows older and earns much less than he requires, George can divorce her at will by proving that she has had affairs with other men. George is persuaded. However, for Weilong, to get married with George is no different from being a prostitute. "Since they were married, Weilong was always busy getting money for George or getting men for Madame Liang" (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 6,* 82).

On the eve of the Chinese New Year, Weilong and George go shopping in an open-air market:

> She [Weilong] walked amid the crowd and had a strange feeling. Overhead was the claret-colored sky, and at the end of the skyline was the claret-colored sea in winter. But there was a place in the harbor crowded with people, with lanterns, and with dazzling commodities—blue ceramic tiny vases of two ear-shaped handles, Badao shrimp crackers wrapped in cellophane bags, over which bundles of onion-green or golden tassels were scattered, amber durian cakes from tropical areas, beads entailed with bunches of flaming red tassels, gosling-yellow scent bags, dark silver tiny crosses, and pagoda-shaped straw hats. However, besides the crowded lanterns, people and commodities, there was a bleak sky and sea—limitless desolation and limitless horrors. Her future would also be desolate and horrible. She could not bear to think of it. As soon as she thought of it, she could only feel the limitless horrors. She didn't have any lifelong plan. Only when her eyes set upon the petty commodities in front of her could her timid and panic heart rest for a while. (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 6,* 83)

Conniving at her fetishist desires, Weilong, rather than getting married to have a financially secured life, marries a libertine and works as a prostitute to support them both. However, in the end, she can only compensate her sacrifice and dissipate her fear for the future by indulging herself in commodities which remind the readers of the process of her self-commodification. The tragedy of Weilong thus gives a striking illustration of how the fetishism of women is connected to the social role of prostitutes.

Female fetishism concerns a woman who has an obsessive interest in commodities, with which she can adorn herself. But it also suggests that a woman who embellishes herself in order to draw the male gaze and who expects to be rewarded with a marriage that promises monetary gain has turned herself into a commodity for men to purchase. As a result, "she becomes an object, and she sees herself as object" (de Beauvoir 361). The mercenary orientation of her marriage makes her a prostitute who sells her body for a living. In these short stories, the female protagonists are usually encircled by lengthy fetishized narratives of fabric, dresses, jewels, and accessories which fuse the women with the commodities and demonstrate how they are deeply trapped in fetishism. Moreover, the narratives are also the aesthetic expressions of the writer who transforms her fetishism into literary artistry. Zhang leads the readers to indulge in the fetishist pleasure. Nevertheless, the tragic endings of the stories remind us that women materialize themselves in order to live up to the images which are actually projections of men's desires, because, as Irigaray notes, it is "from that imitation of what represents paternal authority, that commodities draw their value—for men" (*This Sex Which is Not One* 178).

## 4. Mother/Daughter Relations: Masochist/Sadist Mothers and the Negative

**Oedipus Complex**

The role of mother requests women to fulfill the duties of "reproduction and nursing," which, however, contradict their fetishist desires. Fetishism implies the narcissistic nature of a woman who is attentive to her physical beauty and tries to embellish her body with commodities so that men will be attracted to her. Mothers are deprived of the privilege to be self-involved. As Rey Chow points out, in the materiality of Chinese modernity, "one of the major cultural demands put on women" is "that of self-sacrifice" (122). Self-sacrifice denotes the obfuscation of a woman's individuality and assumes homogeneity among diverse groups of women. It is their unreserved devotion to child-rearing that puts different women in the category of sacrificial mothers.

De Beauvoir notices the difficulty women face in their struggle to keep their beauty, the most prominent concern in their fetishist lives, after they become mothers:

> The women's magazines are full of advice to the housekeeper on the art of preserving her sexual attractiveness while washing dishes, of continuing to be well dressed during pregnancy, of reconciling coquetry, maternity and economy. But even the wife who follows such counsel unswervingly will soon be distracted and disfigured by her cares; it is very difficult to remain desirable with dish-pan hands and a body deformed by maternities. This is why the amorous type of woman feels resentment toward the children who ruin her seductiveness and deprive her of her husband's attentions. (541)

Women who are bereft of "sexual attractiveness" lose the definition of their femininity. As a result, "she lacks the means requisite for self-affirmation as an individual; and in consequence her individuality is not given recognition" (de

Beauvoir 541).

Self-sacrifice is rewarded with reverence from men, not love. Therefore, great mothers are always glorified but not desired. The conflict between women's roles as mothers and lovers is, according to Rey Chow, that between "affectation versus sensuality" or between "reverence versus eroticism" (150). Thus, "women are either the recipients of affection and impotence, or the recipients of sensuality and contempt, because idealization and erotic passion are mutually exclusive" (Chow 138). In her essay, "Tan Tiaowu" 談跳舞 (On Dance), Zhang also reflects on the absurdities brought forth by the admiration of motherly love:

> Motherly love is a huge topic and, like any such topic, has long since been freighted by far too many clichés. The people who advocate motherly love the most loudly are men: men who have been sons and who can never be mothers. Women, if they praise motherly love at all, do so only because they understand that they possess nothing else that will earn the respect of men, that they must play this role to the exclusion of all others. There are some emotions that, performed over and over again, come to seem like nothing more than performance—and no emotion more so than motherly love. (*Written on Water* 184)

Zhang's comments suggest that women who extol motherly love make an attempt to "earn the respect of men" by emphasizing their sacrifices. Victimizing themselves and lamenting their sufferings, women thus become masochistic mothers who make use of self-pity to arouse in men the sense of compassion and even passion. In her performance of self-pity, the masochistic mother exchanges her position with that of her children. No longer a protective character, she becomes a crying baby, calling for comfort and consolation with her tears. It is the mothers, rather than the children, who ask for men's attention and love; it is men who should carry out the duty of the caring and loving mothers.

According to Silverman, "the girl's aspiration to occupy the place of the mother does not imply the latter's exclusion from her erotic economy, but the endless reversibility of their relative positions" (qtd. in Chow 156). Moreover, the "reversibility between the positions of the subjects and objects of love" (Chow 169) gives rise to what Silverman defines as the negative Oedipus complex, or the Oedipus complex from a female perspective. While the Oedipus complex refers to the son's subconscious intention to murder the father and marry the mother, the Negative Oedipus Complex hints at a woman's potential idea of killing her daughter and marrying her son-in-law. As a result, the masochistic mother changes her position from the subject of love, the one who loves, to the object of love, the one who is loved and expects her son-in-law to be "a sympathetic feminine interlocutor/spectator/reader" (Chow 169) of their miseries.

In "A Wilted Flower," Madame Zheng 鄭太太 is representative of the masochistic mother who intends to recapture men's love by recounting to her son-in-law the exaggerated version of her tragic life. Her interest in finding husbands for her daughters can be construed as a way to fulfill her "erotic desires" (Chow 156):

> Madame Zheng was very enthusiastic in looking for prospective sons-in-law. It was the sparkle of fire in her ash-like life. Though she had borne her husband many children, and continued to do so, she had never experienced romantic love. However, she was a virtuous woman. She neither dared to nor had the opportunity to fulfill her desires for love by having affairs with other men. Thus, she hunted men, as other women did. But she hunted men

> who would be her sons-in-law. She knew a beautiful and sad mother-in-law meant something to her sons-in-law. (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 6,* 206)

At the evening of the Mid-autumn Festival, Madame Zheng invites Zhang Yunfan 章雲藩, her daughter's boyfriend, to have dinner with them. Madame Zheng has had a quarrel with her husband shortly before the dinner, and she looks gloomy when sitting at the dining table. She then grasps the opportunity to complain to Yunfan about her misfortunes:

> Madame Zheng helped Zhang Yunfan to some dishes. As she felt distressed, tears fell down her cheeks. She lamented, "Mr. Zhang, you must feel strange when you know the situation of this family. I don't take you as an outsider, so I am willing to tell you what kind of life I have endured during these years [...]. Just ask Chuanchang. Ask her and you will know what kind of person her father is. There is not one single day that I do not warn my daughters. I have told them, 'Nancy, Lucy, Shelley, and Polly, all of you should be careful! Never have a marriage like your mother's. I didn't marry the right person. Don't hurt your mother's heart with unhappy marriages. I cannot stand anything like this anymore.' I have been telling them since they were still children. I told them, 'Study hard and you can make a living by yourself. Then, if you meet the wrong man, you can leave him at your will.' Oh! Mr. Zhang, but it only works for ordinary women. It doesn't work for me, because I am too affectionate, too affectionate. Though I never went to school, I can still earn a living by cooking or sewing clothes for others. No matter how bitter life would be, as long as I am by myself, I can still support myself" [...]. She continued "I

> am entrapped by my affectionateness. I could not witness my children being tortured by their father. I always thought that I will leave this family after two years, when my children have grown up and are able to protect themselves. But by that time, I was pregnant and bore more babies again. How pathetic! A mother has sacrificed her whole life for her children.
>
> She moved sideways and allowed the maid Zhao to serve more dishes. She said to Zhang Yunfan, "Mr. Zhang, please help yourself to the trotters when they are still hot. We have been a couple for so many years, but, as you can see, he still treats me badly. Now I am not afraid of him! I have told him, 'Yes! I am a pathetic woman and I am ill. I am a useless woman so you can torture me. But my children will protect me. Oh! My daughters love me. My sons-in-law love me!'"(*Zhang Ailing Quanji 6,* 210)

Madame Zheng's lengthy monologue has reduced her daughter to complete silence. She becomes the only focus of Yunfan's concern. "Assuming the role of victim," she is able to "give rise to the guilty feeling in the child" (de Beauvoir 530). Her daughter, indebted so much to Madame Zheng's sacrifice, could do nothing but "help Yunfan with some fried shrimp" (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 6,* 210). It is, however, pathetic for Madame Zheng to take advantage of motherly love to ask for the recognition and attention from men.

In her reading of Freud, Rey Chow notices that masochism and sadism are reversible psychologies. As the one who endures the pain becomes the one who causes pain, masochism will turn into sadism:

> For Freud, sadism, the pleasure of inflicting pain on another person, is an

> "active" aim that attaches itself to external objects. Masochism, on the other hand, is "sadism turned around upon the subject's own ego." In this definition of masochism and sadism, "the essence of process is the change of the object, while the aim remains unchanged."(123)

Accordingly, to compensate for the loss of love, women also become sadistic mothers who prey on their daughters' lives.

De Beauvoir takes sadism as a part of a mother's character, which becomes conspicuous when she is jealous of her daughter's happiness:

> Here is the source of irritation some women feel when their daughters first menstruate: they begrudge them their being henceforth real women. In contrast with the repetition and routine that are the lot of the older woman, this newcomer is offered possibilities that are still unlimited: it is these opportunities that the mother envies and hates; being unable to obtain them for herself, she often tries to decrease or abolish them. She keeps the girl in the house, watches her, tyrannizes over her; she purposely dresses her like a fright, gives her no leisure time, gets savagely angry if the girl uses make-up, if she 'goes out'; all her resentment against life is turned against this young life which is springing towards a new future. She endeavors to humiliate the young girl, she ridicules her ventures, she nags her. Open war is often declared between them. (536)

The sharp contrast between the declining life of a mother and the blooming one of a daughter eliminates the motherly love which had received so much tinsel glamour. Taking her daughter as a rival, she persecutes her as a revenge for her miseries.

"Being a female writer, Zhang Ailing never praises motherly love" (Hu Jinyuan 胡錦媛 235). The broken relationship between mothers and daughters is accorded a vivid demonstration in "The Golden Cangue." The protagonist, Cao Qiqiao 曹七巧, is married to a paralyzed son of the Jiang family by her brother because of money, and falls in love with her brother-in-law who, actually a womanizer, dares not to afford the blame of seducing his brother's wife. The pain caused by unfulfilled love and erotic desire twists her psychology. Qiqiao becomes an irritable person with a sharp tongue. People think she is "sane enough one minute and the next minute off again, and altogether disagreeable" (A. Zhang "The Golden Cangue" 540). They despise her, but do not want to offend her. As everyone tries to isolate Qiqiao, her daughter and daughters-in-law become the ready victims.

When her daughter, Chang'an, is about thirteen or fourteen years old, her cousin, Cao Chunxi 曹春熹, a humble and dumb young man, stays with them temporarily while looking for a job in the town. One day, Chang'an and her brother Changbai 長白 throw dice with Chunxi. Losing all her money, Chang'an suggests taking the watermelon seed stored in a can on the top of a wardrobe as counters. She steps on a chair to get the can but tips backwards. She would have fallen to the floor if Chunxi had not hurried to catch her. However, Qiqiao, not knowing what had actually happened, accuses Chunxi of taking advantage of her daughter and drives him out of the house. Then, while Qiqiao gives Chang'an a lecture, a horrible idea comes across her mind. "One of Ch'i-ch'iao's [Qiqiao] feet was going to sleep, and she reached down to pinch it [...]. Her bound feet had been padded with cotton wool to simulate the reformed feet, half let out. As she looked at them, something occurred to her" ("The Golden Cangue"547). Motivated by "momentary enthusiasm" (547), Qiqiao wants to have total control over her daughter by binding her feet. For the following year, Chang'an always "howled in great pain" (547). When her whim subsided, Qiqiao finally let loose Chang'an's feet, which, however, "would never be entirely the same again" (547). It is only by a "momentary enthusiasm" that Qiqiao deforms her daughter's body as well as her heart.

When she is twenty-four, Chang'an is ill with dysentery. Rather than getting her a doctor, Qiqiao persuades her to ease the pain by smoking opium, which she in turn becomes addicted to. No matchmaker comes to talk about a marriage proposal since no one wants to marry an opium addict. As Chang'an is almost thirty and remains single, Qiqiao blames her for not marrying herself: "Not married off because she's not good-looking, and yet blames her mother for putting it off, spoiling her chances. Pulls a long face all day as if I owed her two hundred copper coins. It's certainly not to make myself miserable that I've kept her at home, feeding her free tea and rice!" ("The Golden Cangue" 551). Qiqiao is so slick and shifty that Chang'an can only take the full responsibility for her miseries.

To take advantage of the occasion when Qiqiao is indisposed, Chang'an's cousin introduces her to Tong Shifang. They are attracted to each other after the first date, and soon engaged. While Chang'an is animated by love, Qiqiao is embittered and exacerbated by her happiness:

> Ch'ang-an brought back some of the stray dreams under the starlight and became unusually silent, often smiling. Ch'i-chiao saw the change and could not help getting angry and sarcastic. "These many years we haven't been very attentive to Miss, no wonder Miss seldom smiled. Now you've got your wish and are going to spring out the Chiang's door. But no matter how happy you are, don't show it on your face so much—it's sickening". ("The Golden Cangue" 554)

Impervious to her mother's acrimony, Chang'an determines to overcome her addiction. But soon Qiqiao is informed that Shifang has once broken an engagement because he fell in love with another girl who betrayed him later on. Taking Shifang as a libertine and being paranoid about his intention of swindling Chang'an out of the properties of the Jiang family, Qiqiao decides to destroy their relationship.

Shifang is invited for dinner with the Jiang family. When it is about the time to start the dinner, Changbai wonders why his sister is still absent:

> "She's going to smoke a couple of pipes more and then she'll come down," Ch'i-ch'iao said. Shih-fang [Shifang] was greatly shocked and stared at her intently. Ch'i-ch'iao hurriedly explained, "It's such a pity this child didn't have proper prenatal care. I had to puff smoke at her as soon as she was born. Later, after bouts of illness, she acquires this habit of smoking. How very inconvenient for a young lady! It isn't that she hasn't tried to break it, but her health is so very delicate and she has had her way in everything for so long it's easier said than done. Off and on, it's been ten years now."
>
> Shih-fang could not help changing color. ("The Golden Cangue" 557)

Unable to imagine that a reserved and demure Chinese girl he has fallen for is an opium smoker, Shifang is totally disillusioned.

As he is about to leave the house, Chang'an follows in his footsteps. Shifang pauses for a while in the courtyard:

> She stood still a long way off and just bent her head. Shih-fang bowed slightly, turned, and left. Ch'ang-an felt as though she were viewing this

> sunlit courtyard from some distance away, looking down from a tall building. The scene was clear, she herself was involved but powerless to intervene. The court, the tree, the two people trailing bleak shadows, wordless—not much of a memory, but still to be put in a crystal bottle and held in both hands to be looked at some day, her first and last love. ("The Golden Cangue" 558)

Not hearing a word from Chang'an, readers are still penetrated by the pain she has undergone. Her dream for love is shattered by the casual talk of Qiqiao. Without much labor, she drives away the person whose short presence ever irradiates Chang'an's face, "her first and last love."

Tragedy also befalls Qiqiao's daughter-in-law, Zhishou 芝壽. At Changbai's wedding ceremony, Qiqiao, discontent with Zhishou's appearance, teases her about the shape of her lips in front of the crowded room of guests, suggesting that they are so thick and people could "chop them up and [they'd] make a heaping dish" ("The Golden Cangue" 549). One night after the marriage, Qiqiao encourages her son to criticize his wife. They stay awake for the whole night as Changbai cannot stop reporting to his mother the secrets between him and his wife. No sooner does the day break than Qiqiao invites some of the relatives, Zhishou's mother included, to play mahjong. Over the mahjong table she reveals in detail the secrets confessed by her son and no one is allowed to change the topic. Zhishou's mother "turned purple. Too ashamed to see her daughter, she put down her mahjong tiles and went home in her private rickshaw" ("The Golden Cangue" 550).

For the following two nights, Qiqiao asks Changbai to cook the opium for her, and continue the gossip. Helpless and hopeless, Zhishou lies on the bed. She doesn't know why she has so many defects to be reported. "Chih-shou [Zhishou] suddenly sat up and tore open the bed curtains. This was an insane world, a husband not like a husband, a mother-in-law not like a mother-in-law. Either they were mad or she was" ("The Golden Cangue" 550). Afterwards, Zhishou contracts tuberculosis and passes away. Miss Juan 絹姑娘, the maid, soon becomes Changbai's concubine: a substitute for Zhishou after her death. But "in less than a year she swallowed raw opium and killed herself" (558).

At the twilight of her life, Qiqiao lies on the opium couch and reminisces on her life. "For thirty years now she had worn a golden cangue. She had used its heavy edges to chop down several people; those that did not die were half dead. She knew that her son and daughter hated her to the death, that the relatives on her husband's side hated her, and that her own kinfolk also hated her" ("The Golden Cangue" 558). Her marriage is "the golden cangue" for which her happiness is exchanged. Neither her paralyzed husband nor her brother-in-law can fulfill her erotic desires or realize her expectation for love. Qiqiao, then, takes revenge on the women around her and spares no effort in destroying their lives. Zhang has once remarked that Cao Qiqiao is the only "extremely perverse" (*Written on Water* 17) character in her stories. Bringing her sadism into full play, Qiqiao rarely doles out any motherly love for readers to assuage the discomfort caused by the misfortunes of her daughter and daughters-in-law. Her irrational and even insane behavior only mirrors the desperation of a woman who is trying to compensate for the loss of love by depriving other women of their happiness.

Nowhere does Zhang depict the battle for love between mothers and daughters more explicitly than in "The Heart Sutra." The story is a demonstration of the Electra complex (Li Zhuoxiong 李焯雄 133), by which Freud formulates a girl's love toward her father which incurs her antagonism against her mother. The protagonist, Xu Xiaohan 許小寒, has deep affection for her father, which later on evolves into a conflict with her mother. At the beginning of the story, Xiaohan sits on the railings of the rooftop garden. “There was nothing it seemed but the blue sky, Shanghai, and Hsiao-han [Xiaohan]. No, it was the sky, Hsiao-han and Shanghai, since where she sat was between the sky and the city” (trans. by Edward Gunn, in Gunn 333). Located between the sky and the city, Xiaohan is portrayed as the queen of an “ethereal unreality” (Gunn 333, 334) where the secular morality is powerless to suppress her incestuous love toward her father, Xu Fengyi 許峯儀.

As Li Zhuoxiong points out, the “ethereal unreality” is like a mythological kingdom where Xiaohan is the only focus of concern. Like the spoiled princess in the kingdom, Xiaohan becomes self-absorbed and aggressive. “She not only monopolizes the love of her parents, but also intends to rob her mother of what she has”—her father’s love. “Her meek and mild mother becomes her love rival” (Li 133-34). The interaction between Xiaohan and her father is an imitation of that between lovers. She “moved her index finger up and down along the ridge of Fengyi’s nose” and “stretched out one of her arms and circled it around Fengyi’s neck” (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 6,* 158). She also ruins the relationship between her parents on purpose. Even Mrs. Xu is aware that whenever she puts on beautiful dresses or displays her feeling for her husband, Xiaohan always teases her (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 6,* 179). But Mrs. Xu only takes her behavior as the expression of childishness until Xu Fengyi is also attracted to his daughter.

At first, Fengyi is only attached to “the spiritual solace Xiaohan can offer” (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 6,* 163). However, “spiritual and physical desires cannot be separated from each other” (Guo 19). He finally falls prey to Xiaohan’s voluptuous body:

> At the threshold of the glass door, Fengyi grasped Xiaohan’s arms—the

> ivory- yellow, round arms; she wore a colorful yarn robe. The ground of the robe was vermeil, on which there were pictures of green and pale faces of children. There were numberless children crawling among his fingers. Xiaohan—the lovely child, the child with a chubby, ivory-yellow body... Fengyi jerked his hands away as if they were burned by fire. His color changed. He turned his back toward Xiaohan to avoid her. (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 6,* 164)

Tempted by his daughter but pricked by his conscience, Fengyi holds back his emotion and plans to move Xiaohan to her aunt's house. However, Xiaohan sneers at the futility of his struggle. "She laughed and said, 'You should have already known your desire long before, Daddy...'She spoke the word 'daddy' with the tones of contempt and insult. 'If I don't give you up at first, you will not give me up'" (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 6,* 166).

Xiaohan assures herself that Fengyi is defenseless against her seduction because his love toward Mrs. Xu has faded away. However, her mythological kingdom still collapses when Fengyi takes her classmate who resembles her as a substitute lover. Frustrated and outraged, Xiaohan blames Mrs. Xu for ignoring this extra-martial affair. One day, when Mrs. Xu is trimming the potted plants on the balcony, Xiaohan rushes in, kicking the pots into the ditch. Mrs. Xu is shocked:

> She stood up, enraged, and asked, "Why are you doing this?"
>
> Xiaohan restored her normal breath, biting her teeth tightly and saying, "Good job! It's your good job to disregard their love affair. Father is having an affair with Duan Lingqing. Don't you know? "

> Mrs. Xu replied, “Whether I know it or not, it’s none of your business. If I don’t interfere, why do you have the right to interfere?”
>
> Xiaohan put her hands crossed on her back and said with a trembling voice, “Don’t be so self-satisfied! Don’t think that because you assisted them in bullying me that you have had your revenge…”
>
> As Mrs. Xu heard Xiaohan’s words, her color changed. Suddenly, she slapped her and burst out, “What’s this nonsense you are talking about? Are you out of your mind? Can you talk to your mother like this?” (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 6,* 173-74)

Readers can hardly ignore how Xiaohan interrogates her mother as if she were the wife of her father. In this paragraph, the quarrel between a mother and her daughter is portrayed as one between rivals. The irony suggests itself when we realize that finally both Mrs. Xu and Xiaohan lose the battle for Fengyi’s love.

Panicking that her kingdom is about to crumble, Xiaohan confronts Fengyi and confesses her love, while reminding her father that her classmate is not as naïve as he thinks:

> Fengyi smiled and said, “Maybe she is not a naïve girl. I think naïve girls around the world are the same as you.”
>
> Anxiously, Xiaohan lept to her feet and said, “Is there anything wrong with me? Did I make any mistake? I should not fall in love with my father, but I

> am pure."
>
> Fengyi replied, "I never said you were impure."
>
> Xiaohan sobbed and said, "You despise me because I love you! Where is your humanity? You are an animal! You...You despise me!" (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 6,* 175)

Her idolized father turns out to be a selfish man who denies Xiaohan's love and shows consideration only for his own affairs. Xiaohan feels shattered.

In a last-ditch attempt to win back her father, Xiaohan goes to inform her classmate's mother of their intended marriage, but she is intercepted by Mrs. Xu. Draining all her power, she is unable to fight with Mrs. Xu anymore. On their way home, they sit in the rickshaw. "Her leg pressed heavily on her mother's—she was her mother's creature. Suddenly, she had a strong feeling mixed with revolt and fear. Who was she afraid of? Whom did she revolt against? Her mother? Or herself? They were only two women in love with the same man" (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 6,* 179). Bursting into tears, Xiaohan realizes that "she has committed crimes. She destroyed the love between her father and her mother step by step" (179). At the end of the story, Xiaohan and her mother, two women despoiled of their love, are left in anguish to comfort each other for their loss.

Guo Yuwen asserts that "Xiaohan falls in love with the wrong man, and the man happens to be her father" (18). Her comments correspond to de Beauvoir's claims that "woman seeks the father image in her lover; but it is because he is a man, not because he is a father" (655). What has transpired from the views of Guo and de Beauvoir is that "The Heart Sutra" is more than the demonstration of the Electra complex if we take it as a love story about "how Xiaohan takes pleasure from her love, how she, as a woman, tries to preserve the love, and how she suffers when she is defeated [...]. These are all psychological reactions of a woman, not a daughter" (Guo 18). The Freudian reading of this story will not distract our attention from Xiaohan's rivalry with Mrs. Xu and will not lead us to the conclusion that her infatuation with Fengyi is only an incestuous love as long as we bear in mind that the Electra complex, except for indicating the girl's hostility toward her mother, also implies her intention to be identified with her mother. Therefore, Xiaohan's attempt to replace Mrs. Xu and play the role of Fengyi's wife reaffirms the fact that, in *Chuanqi*, the broken relationship between a mother and a daughter is caused by the conflict between love rivals.

The function of a mother which requires her to be fully devoted to child-rearing, however, contradicts the narcissism of the fetishist women. To reclaim their appeal to men, mothers become the love rivals of their daughters. As a masochistic mother, Madame Zheng indulges in her sacrifice, with which she usurps the position of her daughter to "reconstruct a situation: that which she experienced as a little girl, under adult protection" (de Beauvoir 655), and with which she can steal the attention of her son-in-law. The story of Cao Qiqiao illustrates the perverse behaviors of a sadistic mother who, in order to compensate for her tragic marriage, redeems her happiness by ruining the lives of her daughter and daughters-in-law. In "The Heart Sutra," Xiaohan's love for her father leads to her fight with her mother. The fact that, in these stories, maternal love is overshadowed by women's cravings for men's love is warranted by the words of Grosz which suggests that "maternity under patriarchy curtails the mother's ability to act as a woman" (*Sexual Subversions* 122). The tragedies of these protagonists will be awarded more profundity if we realize how women, frustrated by the demands for self-sacrifice, abuse the duties of mothers and become involved in the battle for love with their daughters.

## 5. The Child Woman: The Virgins and The Victims of Their Virginity

The conflict between a mother and her daughter also alludes to a woman's wish for rejuvenation. She wants to snatch youth from her daughter and become the delicate girl showered by the attention of men. As far as de Beauvoir is concerned, most women long to remain childlike as long as possible, as the girlish naiveté and vulnerability guarantee them against the loss of men's adoration and protection:

> What she wants to recover is a roof over her head, walls that prevent her from feeling her abandonment in the wild world, authority that protects her against her liberty. This childish drama haunts the love of many women; they are happy to be called 'my little girl, my dear child'; men know that the words: 'you are just like a little girl,' are among those that most surely touch a woman's heart. We have seen that many women suffer in becoming adults; and so a great number remain obstinately 'babyish,' prolonging their childhood indefinitely in manner and in dress. (de Beauvoir 655-56)

In Lu Xun's essay, "Shanghai De Shaonü"上海的少女 (The Girls of Shanghai), Yang Ze discovers the idea of *tongnü* 童女 (child-woman) which speaks for men's desires for childlike women:

> As Lu Xun notes, growing up in a dangerous situation, the girls of Shanghai are forced to be precocious. "Spiritually, they are adults while physically, they are still children." He concludes that "the Russian writer,

> Soloqub, has once tried to portray girls of this type. Following his descriptions, these girls are still children, but their eyes belong to those of the adults. The Chinese writers give them another compliment—*jiaoxiao linglong* 嬌小玲瓏 (petite and lovable)." Lu Xun claims that the girls or child-women who grow up in a cosmopolitan city like Shanghai are actually a unique mixture of a child and an adult, or a girl and a woman [...].
>
> [...] Lu Xun's words make us realize that the child-women carry an aesthetic charm which stalls the flow of time. But their petite and loveable bodies that seem unable or refuse to grow up are only the approved images which, under the male gaze, functions to sate the lusts of men. (Yang Ze 15-16)

Being examples of child-women, the girls of Shanghai attain mental maturity while their bodies are still as unripe and pure as those of children. Therefore, the praise of the image of child-women not only insinuates the pedophilia of men, but also denotes their fascination with virginity.

According to Irigaray, "*the virginal woman* [...] *is pure exchange value*" (*This Sex Which is Not One* 186). The high value of virgins is crowned by the fact that their bodies have not been invaded by men. The idea of chastity is advocated by men who are the customers in the market. For a man, to preempt the child-woman is to demonstrate to other competitors his ownership of the commodity. But "once deflowered, woman is relegated to the status of use value [...]. [S]he is removed from exchange among men." She is degraded to the status of prostitution. In this case, "the qualities of woman's body are 'useful.' However, these qualities have 'value' only because they have already been appropriated by a man [...]. [T]he more it (her body) has served, the more it is worth" (*This Sex Which is Not One* 186). In Chinese, women who lose their virginity are compared to *canhua bailiu* 殘花敗柳 (trampled flowers and hacked willows). If their bodies still have value, it is only because they can be repetitively appropriated by men.

As de Beauvoir has noticed:

> the paternalistic ethics imperatively demand that the fiancée be given over to her husband in virginal condition; he wants to be sure she carries no stranger's seed; he wants single and exclusive ownership of this flesh he is making his own. Virginity took on a moral, religious, and mystical value, and this value is still very generally recognized today. (459)

To relieve themselves from the fear of adultery, men decorate the idea of virginity with moral and religious nobility. As a result, a "patriarchal civilization dedicated woman to chastity; it recognized more or less openly the right of the male to sexual freedom, while woman was restricted to marriage" (de Beauvoir 395). The child-woman thus becomes the ideal for men because, on the one hand, their ignorance of sexuality assures men that their descendants are pureblooded. On the other, it suggests that men, more experienced than their wives, should play the role of the dominant leaders during sexual intercourse, which confirms their superiority over women.

The overestimation of virginity, however, brings forth the tragic stories in *Chuanqi*. The story of "Aloe Ashes— The Second Burning" begins with a first person narrator looking for some reference material in the library when her classmate, Clementine 克荔門婷, complains about how she feels disillusioned after her sister has given her a sex education lesson. "I was really surprised! Did you feel that way too? Once a girl had some sex education, she could no longer fall in love with anyone. All the beautiful dreams about love were shattered! How dirty the reality was!" (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 6,* 89). The fact that Clementine is ignorance of sex and averse to physical relationships allows readers to preview the characters of Susie Mitchell 愫細蜜秋兒, the child-woman in this story. Susie is about to marry Roger Upton 羅傑安白登, a senior British professor at a university in Hong Kong. Young, beautiful, naïve, and unsophisticated, she is the perfect bride that men crave. Mrs. Mitchell contributes much to the naiveté of her daughters, making great effort to isolate them from anything which she thinks would pollute their chastity. Therefore, "although Susie was twenty-one years old, she was still a pure child. Her innocence was beyond imagination" (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 6,* 90). Immune from the reality of life, Susie embodies the spirit of a child-woman whose virginity tantalizes men.

On his way to Susie's home, Roger's mind brims with the images of his charming bride:

> Today, he was an important person. [.. .] Because at two o'clock this afternoon, he would get married with the most beautiful woman in the world. His bride had blonde hair. When he ran his fingers through her hair, he could feel a rush of wind coming from the deserts and bringing sand to graze the back of his hand. There were puffs of golden sand in the wind. Dry, comfortable, and tender, the sand spread across people and made them itch. There was always a rush of wind in her hair, and her honey-colored complexion was so clear and refined that it made her look as still as if she were dead. (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 6*, 90)

Comfortable and tender as the flying sand in the wind, Susie is so fascinatingly sweet that even her complexion reminds Roger of the color of honey. However, his praise of her appearance is abruptly followed by the adjective "dead," as if her beauty denotes something lethal. With an irresistible and seductive attraction, Susie, like the femme fatale, is destined to bring misfortune to any man who is involved with her. The image of death dangling at the end of the sentence foreshadows the tragedy that will befall Roger, who, nevertheless, is still intoxicated by the happiness of the wedding.

After the ceremony, the newly-wed couple is left alone in the limousine. "Susie's smiled appeared behind the silk veil. She looked like an expensive big doll wrapped in cellophane papers and lying among curling strips of white paper" (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 6*, 99). Roger marries a doll, beautiful but inanimate, "as if she was dead." The lifelessness of a doll implies how inactive Susie is when it comes to sexual behavior. Moreover, it is suggested that Susie is like Roger's child, much like a doll is usually taken as the child of a little girl. The symbol of the doll thus highlights Susie's image as a child-woman.

The night of their wedding, Susie is terrified when Roger tries to make love to her. Taking her husband as a rapist, she escapes from their house and takes refuge in a college dormitory. It does not take long before all faculty members and students are convinced by Susie's tears that Roger is a beast. Rumors say that Roger frequents the brothels to satisfy his sexual desires. Others even claim that the manic element that had formerly been latent in his mind has now emerged and transformed him into a pervert. Roger's marriage to a child-woman begins to cause him great suffering. Misjudged as a sick person, he still suppresses the discontent and goes to Mrs. Mitchell's to beg for Susie's forgiveness. Roger consoles himself that Susie's family has exterminated all her sexual desires and made her as ascetically pure as a nun. As long as he instills in her mind some "love education," their marriage will survive. But all of a sudden, Roger is annoyed with his plan. "Love education! He always felt revolted by a sentimental phrase like this. At this moment, he hoped the woman he married was an experienced bad woman who knew human nature, a woman who did not need any 'love education'" (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 6*, 108).

Accepting his apology, Susie is filled with expectation for their honeymoon, while Roger is haunted by a sense of worry and suspicion:

> He held the shade of the lamp and made the light shine directly toward Susie's face. Susie could not open her eyes. Laughing and screaming, she said, "Oh, oh, what are you doing?" She covered her eyes with both of her hands. Her head tilted backwards. When she laughed, a line of tiny teeth was exposed. The teeth were so white that they almost looked blue... tiny blue teeth! How beautiful they were! Her fluffy, light-blonde hair was flying in the shadow. Shouldn't a girl with such smooth hair have her mind filled with the dreams as soft and comfortable as feathers? Shouldn't he also be present in her dreams? (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 6*, 111)

The light functions as a magic mirror which will reveal the true character of Susie, the fatal charm that lurks in her heavenly beauty.

While Roger still strives to redeem his reputation, the principle comes to persuade him to resign, as Mrs. Mitchell has visited many of her friends and relatives, the scandal has spread to every British family in Hong Kong. He finds no words to explain how his wife has been twisted psychologically due to the lack of normal sex education. Terrified and desperate, Roger wonders, "he was only an obedient and self-disciplined man. Why does Susie, the girl with blond hair, not allow him to go on living like this?" (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 6*, 116). Now, the British in Hong Kong are all engaged in gossiping about him. Roger is trapped in a hopeless situation and realizes that, wherever he goes, he can never turn over a new leaf in his life.

He soon resigns and attends a faculty seminar as a farewell to his colleagues. Returning home, Roger tries to gas himself. The circle of fire on the gas burner looks like the petals of blue chrysanthemum:

> The long and thin petals curled inwards. Gradually, he turned down the burner, and the petals of fire became shorter little by little. They became so short that they were almost invisible. What remained was a circle of blue tiny teeth. The teeth also disappeared inch by inch. But before they were completely out of sight, suddenly, they pounced out and turned into sharp teeth about one or two inches long. After a moment, following an exploding sound, all the fire was gone. He turned off the burner, closed the door and locked it, and turned on the burner again. But this time he didn't start a fire with matches. Little by little, the faint and sweet smell unique to gas became stronger while the burning aloe ashes of Roger Upton dimmed. The aloe ashes were burnt out. The fire was gone. The ashes turned cold. (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 6*, 125)

The image of the blue teeth reminds readers of the line of tiny blue teeth set in Susie's mouth. The connection between her tiny blue teeth and the circle of fire brings Susie to the scene of Roger's suicide. She is the witness, the accomplice or even the executer of his death. Before the fire is gone, the tiny blue teeth turn into long and sharp fangs, lodging in the body of the victim with an attempt to take away Roger's life. Susie, the ideal child-woman, forces her husband to commit suicide by the power of her incredible purity and chastity. She is, however, also an immaculate murderer who will never realize that it is her virginity that makes her a criminal. As an ordinary professor, Roger should not be punished for his fascination with a beautiful and naïve girl. "Aloe Ashes—The Second Burning" would be a common love story that ingratiates romantic lovers if it were not haunted by the repetition of the glowering images of death. But not until the last moment will the readers as well as Roger and Susie realize how the obsession with virgins incurs the crime of homicide. The ending of the story, containing this unexpected twist, becomes a poignant mockery of the ridiculous ideas prevailing in a patriarchal society.

In "Red Rose and White Rose," Teng Zhenbao 佟振保 compares his mistress, Wang Jiaorui 王嬌蕊, a passionate and voluptuous woman, to a red rose. His wife, Meng Yanli 孟煙鸝, however, is as pure and chaste as a white rose. The first impression Yanli creates in Zhenbao is a plain whiteness which signifies her purity and virginity:

> The first time they met each other was in the living room of someone's house. She stood by the glass door, wearing a grey chiffon blouse of orange-red stripes. But the first impression she gave to people was the vague whiteness. She was tall and slender. Her figure was like a straight vertical line. Only around the area of her tiny nipples and her high cheek bones were there slight curves. When a gust of wind came to her and her dress flew backwards, she looked even slender. Her face was broad and made her look tender and comely. But people could only see the whiteness around her [...]. She was twenty-two and about to graduate from university. She was not good at studying, and could only go to schools with little distinction. But Yanli was a good student in a bad school. She was

> hardworking and rarely associated with her classmates. Her whiteness, functioning like the white screen in the hospital, had isolated her from anything vicious. (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 5*, 83)

The whiteness that distinguishes Yanli also declares her purity. This is, however, so overwhelming that it obscures her individuality and maroons her from the reality of life. She thus becomes a withdrawn and insipid woman. Insulated from the pollution of corporal desires usually labeled as obscenities, she is as ignorant of sex as Susie. While Jiaorui inspires Zhenbao to develop his sexual fantasies the first time they meet, Yanli only disappoints him by the size of her breasts. Her "tiny nipples" resemble those of little girls who have not menstruated yet. Psychologically and physically, Yanli lives up to the expectations for a child-woman and the worship of virginity makes her the ideal candidate for a virtuous wife.

Zhenbao, actually attracted to the vehement emotion of Jiaorui, tries to keep up his image as a person of strict morals. Therefore, when it comes to marriage, he decides to have a wife of undoubted chastity. Nevertheless, he soon realizes that his virgin wife is also sexually frigid:

> Yanli did not like exercise, not even "the best indoor exercise." To fulfill the duty of a husband, Zhenbao had tried his best to arouse her interest in it. But he was not attracted to her body. At first, he might feel that there is something cute about it. Holding her small breasts in his hands, Zhenbao thought they were like sound sleeping birds, with their hearts beating smoothly. When their sharp beaks poked his palms, Zhenbao felt something both hard and soft. The beaks were hard, and his palms were soft. Later on, she even lost the loveliness that belonged to little girls.

> When Zhenbao got used to everything, for him, Yanli was a very boring woman.
>
> It was from then on Zhenbao started whoring every three weeks [...]. He was not picky about their appearance but he preferred tanned and plump women. What he asked for was the submission of plump bodies. (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 5*, 84)

Like the "sound sleeping birds," Yanli's breasts are alive but motionless, not active in their sex life. Moreover, the nipples are as aggressive as beaks which jab Zhenbao in order to defend Yanli from his invasion. His soft palms are the only thing warm and emotional during their intercourse. The contrast between motionlessness and activeness, hardness and softness, on the one hand, explain how Zhenbao is frustrated by Yanli's frigidity. On the other, they account for his desire for tanned and buxom bodies, the opposite to the pale and skinny one of his wife.

Toward the end of the story, Zhenbao, almost forsaking all this pretentious righteousness, flirts with prostitutes in public:

> One afternoon he went out fooling around with a woman. Intentionally, he went home to take some money for their fun. The woman waited for him in the rickshaw. The sky had just cleared, and there were still puddles of water on the streets. A line of tiny red houses was situated on the other side of the street. Above the green leaves of the tress there hovered green-blue halos. Wet and yellow smoke came out of the chimneys and floated low. Zhenbao went out with the money. He hit the puddles of water with an umbrella and the water spattered all over the woman. She screamed.

> Zhenbao seated himself in the rickshaw and burst into laughter. He felt something gloomy in his happiness. He raised his head and looked at the window upstairs. It might be Yanli who stood by the window and looked downwards. She was like a yellow-blotted, white-laced old saucer hanging on the wall of the bathroom. Or she was like a shallow white plate, the center of which was stained by the color of tea. Zhenbao hit the puddles again with the umbrella— smashed it! Smashed it! (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 5*, 96)

As if to protest to his wife, Zhenbao flaunts his affair with a prostitute in public. Yanli stands aloof by the window, like a marble statue of Venus, haughty and nonchalant. However, the purity of the child-woman has been smeared as her whiteness, compared to the white saucer or the white plate, turns yellow. The yellow blots refer to dirt piled on the statue if left unattended for a long time. Zhenbao marries a virgin whose frigidity denies him any sexual pleasure. He can do nothing but look at this beautiful and cold statue in the house, leaving it to grow rusty and dusty. He can never smash the marble statue, but his world of stoical virtues has been smashed by it.

The patriarchal value which lays great emphasis on virginity creates the image of a child-woman, the woman who is as unsophisticated and pure as a little girl. Ignorant of sex, the child-woman assures men of their chastity and confirms their dominance in their sex life. However, Susie and Yanli, the perfect personifications of the child-woman in these stories, bring disaster to their husbands. While Roger commits suicide, Zhenbao wallows in degeneration. They are the victims of the virginity of their wives. With the portrayal of the characters who strictly stick to the requirements for a child-woman, Zhang actually derides and subverts the idea of virginity.

### 6. Men's Love as Women's Religion

Irigaray points out that "*commodities, women, are a mirror of value of and for man*" (*This Sex Which is Not One* 177). Accordingly, women are the reflections of men's desires. A woman feels recognized only when she becomes the object men desire most. The patriarchal logic tells that what is granted the supreme value is the phallus, because it is "the very attribute that grants him a position as an active, desiring, anaclitic subject" (Grosz, *Sexual Subversions* 108). But this is also the genitals that a woman lacks. Therefore, to confer the phallus the highest value is, on the one hand, to assert that men are superior to women. On the other, taking advantage of the worship for the phallus, men are given more power to express their desires which then inspire them to create the feminine characteristics for women. A woman "is relegated to the position of castrated, passive object, who seeks, not (actively) to desire, but (passively) to be desired" (Grosz, *Sexual Subversions* 108).

Unable to be "the phallic subject," (Grosz, *Sexual Subversions* 108) a woman can only strive to become the phallus herself, because "she *has* the phallus, then, only insofar as she *is* the phallus (for someone who loves or desires her). This is the so-called normal path of femininity, the compensation for (and thus acceptance of) her castration." Therefore, "if man believes he *has* the phallus (the object of desire) then woman believes she *is* the phallus. The man's penis and the whole of the woman's body are rendered psychically equivalent. He *has* the object of desire while she *is* the object of desire" (Gorsz, "Lesbian Fetishism?" 110). To redeem the lack of the phallus, a woman tries to "phallicize her whole body, treating it as if it were the phallus," and thus she becomes the most valuable object in the patriarchal society, the most desirable woman in men's eyes. Moreover, the phallicization of a woman's body also suggests penis-envy, as the penis is "the only thing valuable to be envied" and it is "the very standard of all value" (Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman* 53). Therefore, driven by penis-envy, "the narcissistic woman strives to make her body into the phallus" (Grosz, "Lesbian Fetishism?" 111).

To attach importance to their genitals reveals the male anxiety towards castration. While men are afraid of losing the phallus, women, born to be rid of the phallus, convey the apprehension for losing men's love. For a woman, to become the focus of men's desire means she is as precious and priceless as the phallus. Thus, his love becomes the criterion by which a woman calculates her value. She has "nothing more to fear since she has *nothing* to lose [...]. She will therefore fear not the loss of her castrated sex organ but only the loss of *the love of her owner*" (Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman* 84). To identify herself with the genitals of men, a woman has to efface herself. She only "dreamed of herself as seen through men's eyes, and it is in men's eyes that the woman believes she has finally found herself" (de Beauvoir 656). His love is "the ultimate signifier" (de Beauvoir 656) for her. It is her religion.

De Beauvoir notices that a woman's devotion to love resembles the passionate commitment a pious person makes to God:

> Now, the woman in love is not simply and solely a narcissist identified with her ego; she feels, more than this, a passionate desire to transcend the limitations of self and become infinite [...]. She abandons herself to love first of all to *save herself*; but the paradox of idolatrous love is that in trying to save herself she *denies herself* utterly in the end. Her feeling gains a mystical dimension; she requires her God no longer to admire her and approve of her; she wants to merge with him, to forget herself in his

> arms […].
>
> In order to realize this dream, what woman wants in the first place is to serve; for in responding to her lover's demands, a woman will feel that she is necessary; she will be integrated with his existence, she will share his worth, she will be justified. Even mystics like to believe, according to Angelus Silesius, that God needs man; otherwise they would be giving themselves in vain. The more demands the man makes, the more gratified the woman feels. (660)

To maximize the power of love, a woman gives herself up to a man. Her life becomes significant only when it is showered by his love. In her essay "You Nü Tong Che" 有女同車 (With the Women on the Tram), Zhang also laments that women spend their life only on the concerns about men. "The women on the tram filled me with sorrow. Women—women whose lives are consumed in talking about men, thinking about men, resenting men, now and forever" (*Written on Water* 146). Zhang's sorrow, therefore, informs us of how women are wedded to the love of men.

In "Aloe Ashes—The First Burning," Weilong is trapped in her fetishist desires and finally becomes a prostitute. However, it is her love for George that imprisons her in Mrs. Liang's house:

> Subconsciously, maybe she was unwilling to go back home. She stalled on purpose […]. Though she received an education, it was improper for a beautiful but unskillful girl like her to earn a living by herself. It was better for her to get married. Then, a new life for her meant to be married with another man…Another man? But she had lost all her confidence because

> of George. She was unable to be together with other men anymore. As long as George didn't love her, she would always succumb to him. She understood that George was only a libertine. There was nothing to be afraid of. What really terrified her was that George had aroused the irrational and brutal passion in her heart. (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 6*, 79)

As Shui Jing points out, Weilong falls in love with George at first sight, and their relationship is completely based on her unilateral affection for him (*Zhang Ailing Weiwan* 153). Indulged in her "irrational and brutal passion," Weilong takes her life as a sacrifice for their marriage.

Though a rake that lives off women, George is also disturbed because of guilt over having failed Weilong's love:

> After a few minutes, George spoke suddenly, "As a matter of fact, Weilong, I am a liar, but I have never told a lie to you. I am surprised at this too." Weilong laughed and replied, "Still sticking to the same topic!" George asked her again to give her confirmation. "I have never told a lie to you, have I?" Weilong sighed and said, "No, never. Even if you know only a lie can please me so much, but...never. You are too lazy to worry about the lies." George laughed and said, "But I do not have to lie to you. You are good at lying to yourself. One day, you will be willing to admit that I am a despicable man. By that time, you will regret that you have sacrificed so much for me! Instigated by your anger, you might kill me! I am really afraid of it!" Weilong laughed and replied, "I love you. But it is none of your business. You will be the last one to be blamed." (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 6*, 84)

Aware that she ruins her life for a man who will never reciprocate, Weilong does not blame George for her miseries. "Knowing that she should not fall for a man like him, Weilong still cannot help herself. This is the way she loves George. It is a fatal love, which will completely destroy her" (Shui Jing, *Zhang Ailing Weiwan* 154). However, Weilong's devotion to love does not ask for the rewards, but for the accomplishment of her piety.

In "A Wilted Flower," Chuanchang has tuberculosis before she marries Zhang Yunfan. As a doctor, Yunfan is responsible for taking care of her. Ironically, the romantic encounter between Chuanchang and her lover turns into the therapeutic contact between a doctor and his patient. Chuanchang feels chagrined at this:

> When he touched her chest bones with slightly cold fingers, the fingers of a science man, she turned her head aside and stared at the blue sky outside the window. She had been looking forward to the intimate contact with her lover from a long time ago… yes, someday there would be… someday there would be… but she couldn't imagine it would be contact like this. It was beyond her imagination.
>
> Her eyes were covered with a liquid lid. (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 6*, 215)

Still harboring the hope for love, Chuanchang is eager for recovery. However, the more eager she is, the weaker she becomes. To alleviate her anxiety, Yunfan once murmurs to her: "I will always wait for you!" (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 6*, 216).

But after she stays indisposed for two years, the rumor comes to Chuanchang that Yunfan has been dating a nurse:

> Chuanchang felt there was heat surging up from her chest. Her hands were burning bitterly. She tucked them in the pillow case to cool them down. Once, he had murmured to her, "I will always wait for you." His voice still lingered around her ears. But she couldn't blame him. He had kept waiting for almost two years. Now, he probably thought she was hopeless.
>
> Hopeless. Still Chuanchang expected there would be a beautiful life for the coming ten years, a glittering life for the coming ten years, a rich and abundant life for the coming twenty years. Could they be all hopeless now? (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 6*, 216)

Abandoned by her lover, Chuanchang wallowed in despair. For her, if there is the promise of love, there will be beauty, happiness and abundance. She still kept in mind his words as if they were the bible. All her dreams for life were based on his love. Thus, his relationship with another woman blighted her aspirations for life. But she does not place blame on Yunfan either. Left alone and unblessed, she could only lament her tragic life.

The craving for love makes the women in *Chuanqi* feverishly yearn for marriage, which provides a lifelong guarantee of men's love. In "Red Rose and White Rose," Yanli glowed with happiness for her marriage with Zhenbao:

> The period between the engagement and the wedding was too short. In her heart, Yanli felt quite disappointed. She took it as the best period of time in a woman's life. However, on the day of the wedding, she was happy. In the morning, she did not completely wake up. Still dozing and half-conscious,

> she felt she was combing her hair. Raising her arms and facing the mirror, she was amazed that she worked so hard in combing her hair. As if she was put in a test tube and moving upwards to tip off the lid of the tube, she couldn't wait to leap forward from the present to the future. The present was good, and the future was even better—she stretched her arms out of the window. Outside the window was her future. A gentle wind just blew from the future, sifting through her hair. (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 5*, 84)

Before getting married, Yanli is trapped within her family as if locked in a test tube. However, her marriage, like an open window, invites her to take a trip to her future. She casts no doubt on the benevolence of her husband and the happiness of their marriage, which will bring her a pleasant and carefree life. The blowing of wind soothes Yanli and reassures her of her beliefs.

In "In the Years of Youth," the medical student Pan Ruliang 潘汝良 is in love with a Russian girl, Cynthia 沁西亞. She tutors him in Russian and he engrosses himself in the fantasies about their romances until Cynthia informs him of her marriage. Ruliang goes to the church to attend the wedding. It is a rainy day. The church is dim and reeks of the smell of wet shoes. The father looks sleepy since he has been drinking. The chorus sweats heavily. The wedding assistant serves the bride and bridegroom with two glasses of wine and places upon their heads the wedding crowns. Listless and careless the assistant wears a pair of slippers. His long and greasy hair hangs on both sides of his face, making him look like a ghost. The wedding witnesses repellence and disillusionment. Even the bridegroom looks disinterested and unenthusiastic:

> The bridegroom seemed to be impatient and anxious. He was an irritable

> lad with yellow hair. Though he had a classical, straight nose, he looked like a man with no aggressive aspirations. Casually, he was dressed in an informal, worn white suit, while the bride was wearing a formal wedding gown of white bengalines. Two old women beside Ruliang argued about whether they rented the wedding gown or just borrowed it. The argument lasted for a while. (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 6*, 198)

The whole wedding would have been a farce had it not been glorified by the devotional manner of the bride:

> Ruliang could not help admiring Cynthia and thus admired all the other women. In the wedding ceremony, only Cynthia looked beautiful. It was as if she had made up her mind to create some beautiful memories for her wedding. Holding the white candle in her hands, she bowed piously. The upper part of her face was under the shadow of the veil and the lower part was under the shadow of the flame. Between the flickering flame and shadows her smile appeared, almost invisible and pale. She created a mysterious and dignifying wedding atmosphere that belonged to a bride. Though the father was listless, the assistant was terribly dirty, the bridegroom was impatient, and her wedding gown was either rented or borrowed, it was a unique day in her life. There should be something worth remembering. When she was old, she could reminisce about it. Ruliang felt poignant and his eyes were wet. (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 6*, 198)

The divine nature of a church is usually connected to the holiness of love, as if love can transcend the secular desires of ordinary people. However, Cynthia is confronted with a hell-like church. Predicting that there will be a loveless marital life, she can only achieve her dreams of love in the church. Therefore, regardless of the indifferent people around her, Cynthia is completely devoted to her wedding. Her faith in love sublimes her with dignity and magnificence. She is more than aware that once the ceremony is finished, only the memory of it can console her for the rest of her life. But every time Cynthia recalls it, she will be brought back to the most resplendent hours of her life. Only with the reminiscence of transient love can Cynthia feel satisfied and completed.

Women in *Chuanqi* are often financially dependent, with the exception of "Shutdown," where the protagonist, Wu Cuiyuan 吳翠遠, is portrayed as a career woman who works as an English tutor in college. Well-educated and self-supporting, Cuiyuan has a higher social status than the average woman in Shanghai during the 1940s. However, education does not dissuade her from longing for love. She wears "a white linen cheongsam, with thin blue piping all around. The dark blue and white might have been announcing a funeral" (trans. by Janet Ng with Janice Wickeri, in A. Zhang, "Shutdown" 95). She is imprisoned within the thin blue frame of her cheongsam. Without love, her life is constricted and meaningless. Cuiyuan lingers on a death-in-life. Even her dress smacks of a funeral as if it is to mourn for the demise of her youth.

Once proud of her accomplishments, her parents become disappointed when she grows older and remains single:

> The Wu family was a new-style, model family of Christian background. They encouraged their daughter to study diligently and climb the social ladder, step by step to the pinnacle. A woman of twenty-something teaching in college—that was record-breaking among professional women.

> Yet now her parents were losing interest in her. Now they wished she had been a bit less diligent in school, and had spared some time to find them a rich son-in-law. ("Shutdown" 95)

Concentrating on her studies, Cuiyuan has spared little time worrying about marriage. As a result, she has become a victim of her education. Her diligence is rewarded with public admiration which, nevertheless, does not outlive her spinsterhood.

Measuring up to the standards of a successful woman, Cuiyuan still felt grief:

> She was a good daughter, a good student. The people in her family were good people. They bathed every day. They read the newspaper and when they listened to the radio, it wasn't to Shanghai songs or comic Peking operas or things like that, but to the symphonies of Beethoven or Wagner. They didn't understand them, but they listened anyway. Good people outnumbered real people in this world...Cuiyuan was unhappy. ("Shutdown" 95)

The Wu family lives a model life. But all their good manners only serve to court people's praises and flatter their vanity, while they are impervious to the advantages of a healthy life. Cuiyuan loses her happiness in a life full of etiquettes and proprieties.

Her life changes when she encounters Lü Zongzhen 呂宗楨 on a tram during the shutdown. To avoid meeting his relative, Zongzhen takes the seat beside Cuiyuan and strikes up a conversation with her. At first, Cuiyuan is surprised at his forwardness. But soon she learns to enjoy it:

> Cuiyuan smiled. She had not expected such a pretty speech from someone like him—and she had thought him the very model of a strait-laced businessman! She gave him another look. A ray of sunlight shone right through the soft cartilage at the base of his nose, turning it red. The hand that extended from his sleeve and rested on his newspaper was yellow, sensitive—a real, live person! Not very honest, not very bright, but a real, live person! She suddenly felt eager, happy! ("Shutdown" 97)

Education has associated Cuiyuan with well-behaved people but isolated her from real people. However, during the shutdown, when she is temporarily detached from the surroundings of her daily life, she is provided the opportunity to be in contact with a real person and a real man who brings happiness into her life. Relieved from her strict and tedious life, Cuiyuan is cheered up by the words of a man.

Cuiyuan shows her understanding when Zongzhen complains about his marriage. Her considerate behavior soon enchants him:

> He looked at her, and she blushed. He caught her blushing and he was glad. Her blushed deepened when she perceived his gladness.
>
> Zongzhen had not thought that he could make a woman blush, make her smile, make her look away, make her turn to him. Here, he was a man. Normally, he was an accountant, a father to his children, the head of a family, a passenger on a tram, a customer in a store, a citizen. But to this woman who knew nothing about him, he was simply a man.
>
> They began to fall in love. ("Shutdown" 98)

Being in love, Cuiyuan is no longer a good daughter and a good student. She transforms from a person who "looked like squeezed toothpaste—no distinguishing marks" ("Shutdwon" 96) into "a lovable woman—pale, fragile, warm—like breath on the winter air. If you do not want her, she will silently vanish. She is part of yourself. She understands everything. She forgives you everything" ("Shutdown" 98). Love clothes Cuiyuan with tender tolerance, by which Zongzhen defines her femininity. Out of impulse, he begins to think about divorce and re-marriage. But before he is determined to make any promise to Cuiyuan, the shutdown is over, and life returns to its normal track.

Zongzhen stands up and packs himself into the crowd. Cuiyuan closes her eyes as if unwilling to see him get off the tram:

> The tram lights were switched on. She opened her eyes and saw him sitting far away in his old seat! She was shocked—he had not gotten off after all! She understood now. Everything that had taken place during the shutdown hadn't happened at all. The whole of Shanghai had fallen asleep and dreamed an absurd dream. ("Shutdown" 100)

Cuiyuan, like all of Shanghai, fell asleep during the shutdown and dreamed a dream in which her desire for love was fulfilled. Unfettered from the confinement of her thin blue piped dress, she is likened to "a peony, sketched in a few quick strokes, straying strands of her hair on her forehand like stamens in the wind" ("Shutdown" 98). Love makes her as coquettish as a peony. However, when the shutdown is over, she is awakened and the dream is also shattered. For Zongzhen, the encounter during the shutdown is either a flirtation or an escape from his drab life. But Cuiyuan is animated and unbounded from the inanition that haunts her life. She realizes that "she would probably marry one day, but her husband would never be as lovable as the man she had met by chance—a man on a tram during the shutdown…it would never again be this natural" ("Shutdown" 99). During the shutdown, she experienced the unaffected love which, once blossoming in a dream, is doomed to shrivel up in reality.

Education dissociates Cuiyuan from love, and it is only when she is rid of her educational background during the shutdown does she encounter love. As Guo Yuwen remarks:

> during the shutdown, Cuiyuan seemed to be revived, even though Lü Zongzhen merely used her to defend himself against his poor relative. But this game of flirtation is pretty exciting to Cuiyuan. They are strangers. Zongzhen knew nothing about her. In other words, in front of Zongzhen, Cuiyuan was only a woman. She regained her traditional role as a woman—sympathizing with him, tolerating him, and even forgiving him. Lü Zongzhen aroused the simple and primitive desires in her heart.
>
> […] Knowledge cannot change the basic needs of a woman. Neither can it help her resolve the problems about her sexual desires. On the contrary, it makes her lose all her energy, unable to control her own life, alienated from the public and detached from real life. (6-7)

For Cuiyuan, knowledge is not as powerful as love. Zhang uses the background of the shutdown to trap a man and a woman in the small space of a tram. All the essences of love become substantial within this short period of time. Thus, it is more than evident to see how dramatically Cuiyuan has been delighted and vitalized by this meteoric love.

In "The Golden Cangue," Chang'an is also once blessed by her short-lived love. Before falling in love with Shifang, she is devastatingly tormented by Qiqiao and "gradually gave up all thought of self-improvement and kept to her place." Even if she is still young, "she did not seem fresh, but was like a tender bunch of vegetables that had been salted" (A Zhang, "The Golden Cangue" 548). It seems that Chang'an is already dead despite this being the prime time of her life and her body, "like a tender bunch of vegetables," preserved by salt. Like Cuiyuan, she also drags out a death-in-life. Convinced that it is impossible to be released from Qiqiao's grip, she abandons herself to making troubles, playing "little tricks," and interfering with "the running of the house" ("The Golden Cangue" 548). Had there not been any accident that changed her life, she would have become as cynical and insane as her mother.

However, after she is engaged with Tong Shifang, her life is revived by love:

> After the engagement Ch'ang-an furtively went out alone with T'ung Shih-fang [Tong Shifang] several times. The two of them walked side by side in the park in the autumn sun, talking very little, each content with a partial view of the other's clothes and moving feet. The fragrance of her face powder and his tobacco smell served as invisible railings that separated them from the crowd. On the open green lawn where so many people ran and laughed and talked, they alone walked a porch that wound on endlessly in silence.
>
> [...] Sometimes it rained in the park. Ch'ang-an would open her umbrella and Shih-fang would hold it for her. Upon the translucent blue silk, myriad raindrops twinkled like a skyful of stars that would follow them about later

> on a taxi's glistening front window of crushed silver and, as the car ran through red and green lights, a nestful of red stars would fly humming outside the window and a nestful of green stars. ("The Golden Cangue" 553-54)

The aroma of Chang'an's face powder and the smell of Shifang's tobacco function like the period of the shutdown and separate them from the crowd in the park. Oblivious to the noises of people running and talking on the lawn, they walk side by side, on a porch which demarcates the border of a world exclusive to lovers. When it rains, the raindrops are like green and red stars sparkling in the darkness of her life, bringing to her the light of hopes. Without any description of the conversation between Chang'an and Shifang, the strength of their quiet love still suffuses the park and the raining day. The ordinary life becomes splendid because of the sprouting sentiments between lovers. Chang'an "brought back some of the stray dreams under the starlight and became unusually silent, often smiling" ("The Golden Cangue" 554). With love, she seems to be endowed with the courage to expect a lively life which, nevertheless, becomes an illusion when Qiqiao discloses to Shifang that his fiancée is an opium addict. Bidding farewell to her lover, Chang'an knows that the hope for a regenerated life is gone. She will never find true love for the rest of her life. She can only put her sweet memory "in a crystal bottle and held in both hands to be looked at some day" ("The Golden Cangue" 558).

A sadistic mother who is irritated by the happiness of her daughter, Cao Qiqiao is also a woman craving for love. She is attracted to her brother-in-law, Jiang Jize 姜季澤, who does not want to be involved in an affair with his sister-in-law. However, when Qiqiao becomes a widow and inherits some land from the Jiang family, Jize calls upon her, trying to persuade her to sell the land and obtain a commission on the business deal. To thaw her frigidness, he lies that he has once been in love with her:

> Ch'i-ch'iao bowed her head, basking in glory, in the soft music of his voice and the delicate pleasure of this occasion. So many years now, she had been playing hide-and-seek with him and never could get close, and there had still been a day like this in store for her. True, half a lifetime had gone by—the flower-years of her youth. Life is so devious and unreasonable. Why had she married into the Chiang [Jiang] family? For money? No, to meet Chi-tse [Jize] , because it was fate that she should be in love with him. She lifted her face slightly. He was standing in front of her with flat hands closed on her fan and his cheek pressed against it. He was ten years older too, but he was after all the same person. Could he be lying to her? He wanted her money—the money she had sold her life for? The very idea enraged her. Even if she had him wrong there, could he have suffered as much for her as she did for him? Now that she had finally given up all thoughts of love he was here again to tempt her. His eyes—after ten years he was still the same person. Even if he were lying to her, wouldn't it be better to find out a little later? ("The Golden Cangue" 543-44)

Dissolved by the tender voice of the one she still loved, Qiqiao bows her head to be blessed by love as if she is a churchwoman sanctified by a glorious halo overhead. She is aware that her marriage is nothing more than a trade, but love transforms her into a girl with romantic fantasies which convince her that her dismal matrimony is destiny bringing her to Jize.

Now, the man she has loved for half a lifetime stands in front of her. Qiqiao's dream for love is almost fulfilled. "Her weakness, however, is only momentary. The golden cangue in which she had locked herself during all these years of waiting and scheming has incapacitated her for love, real or spurious" (Hsia, *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction* 400). She has sacrificed so much for money that she is sensitive to people who come to her for it. Finally, the concern of reality overtakes her. Hysterically, she throws her fan at Jize to drive him away. The fan upsets the cup of sour plum drink on the table. The juice spills all over:

> Drop by drop, the sour plum juice trickled down the table, keeping time like a water clock at night—one drip, another drip—the first watch of the night, the second watch—one year, a hundred years. So long, the silent moment. Ch'i-ch'iao stood there, holding her head up with one hand. In another second she had turned around and was hurrying upstairs. Lifting her skirt, she half climbed and half stumbled her way up, continually bumping against the dingy wall of green plaster. Her Buddha-blue jacket was smudged with patches of pale chalk. She wanted another glimpse of him from the upstairs window. No matter what, she had loved him before. Her love had given her endless pain. That alone should make him worthy of her continuing regard. How many times had she strained to repress herself until all her muscles and bones and gums ached with sharp pain. Today it all had been her fault. It wasn't as if she didn't know he was no good. If she wanted him she had to pretend ignorance and put up with his ways. Why had she exposed him? Wasn't life just like this and no more than this? In the end what was real and what was false? [...]
>
> A curtain of ice-cold pearls seemed to hang in front of Ch'i-ch'iao's eyes.

> A hot wind would press the curtain tight on her face, and after being sucked back by the wind for a moment, it would muffle all her head and face before she could draw breath. In such alternately hot and cold waves her tears flowed. ("The Golden Cangue" 545)

Driving him away, Qiqiao feels the moment without Jize's company is as long as a hundred years. She is surrounded by a terrible solitude without love. Rushing upstairs to have the last glimpse of him as if it is the only moment worthy of remembering for the rest of her life, Qiqiao is gnawed by her attachment for Jize. The contrast between the cold pearl curtain and the hot wind is parallel with the contrast between the cold-blooded behavior and warm-hearted remorse of Qiqiao. Ruthlessly, Qiqiao determines to shatter her dreams of love in defense of her money. However, the hot tears flowing out of her eyes also symbolize the warmth of love that flows from her life.

In her old age, Qiqiao lies in bed, recalling her youth:

> She groped for the green jade bracelet on her wrist and slowly pushed it up her bony arm, as thin as firewood, until it reached the armpit. She herself could not believe she'd had round arms when she was young. Even after she had been married several years, the bracelet only left room enough for her to tuck in a handkerchief of imported crepe. As a girl of eighteen or nineteen, she would roll up the lavishly laced sleeves of her blue linen blouse, revealing a pair of snow-white wrists, and go to the market.
>
> Among those that liked her were Ch'ao-lu of the butcher shop; her brother's sworn brothers, Ting Yu-ken and Chang Shao-ch'uan; and also

> the son of Tailor Shen. To say that they liked her perhaps only means that they liked to fool around with her; but if she had chosen one of these, it was very likely that her man would have shown some real love as years went by and children were born. ("The Golden Cangue" 558)

Not nourished by love, Qiqiao is finally drained of life. She is like a skeleton, a sharp contrast to her young and round arms which had seemed to have been filled with the possibilities and promises of love. Recounting the men she encounters in her youth, the senile sadistic mother indulges in the memories of her flirtations with men. She has the minimum requirements for love: marrying one of the men who likes to fool around with her and expecting some real love when she bears children for him. In "The Golden Cangue," the cruelty and perverseness of Cao Qiqiao always sends a chill down the readers' spines. But her relentlessness also acts as a foil to make her hopeless cravings for love even more heart-stirring.

"Waiting" is a story about women whose lives are occupied by the concern over men. In the clinic of the osteopath, Pang Songling 龐松齡, Mrs. Xi 奚太太 is expressing her suspicion that her husband has a concubine, while Mr. Pang's daughter, Ah Fang, listens attentively:

> She poked her fingers out of the holes of the net bag and grasped a sheet of newspaper, slapping it on the sofa violently and producing rustling sounds. She murmured, "The authorities have ordered them to have concubines—ordered them to have concubines! China had lost huge number of the population because of the war, and people are to be encouraged to bear children. The authorities have declared that men without the company of their wives for two years can marry another woman. Now they do not call

> them concubines. They call them the second wives! The authorities are afraid that the officers would not be able to concentrate on their work because there is no one around to take care of them—they ordered them to have concubines!"
>
> Ah Fang asked, "Do your parents-in-law ever say anything about it?"
>
> "They never care about anything like that. They just told me, 'Anyway, you are the only legitimate wife in this family.' Now I do not want to worry about it anymore. I am more than forty years old---"
>
> Ah Fang smiled and replied, "No, you are not over forty. It looks like you are only around thirty."
>
> Mrs. Xi sighed and said, "I am already old!" But suddenly she became suspicious and asked, "Have I grown much older within these two years?"
>
> Ah Fang examined her face for a while, laughing and saying, "Because you do not adorn yourself anymore. You put on cosmetics before."
>
> Mrs. Xi leaned forward a little bit and said with a low voice, "No, it's because I have lost much of my hair. I didn't realize how terribly I have been balding." Everyone in the room listened to Mrs. Xi, and she just took it for granted. Therefore, in her bitterness she also felt flattered. (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 5,* 104-05)

Wrenched away from her husband by his concubine and trying to find out reasons for the abandonment, Mrs. Xi blames the authorities for encouraging men to marry other women. She also complains over the fact that her parents-in-law brush aside her worries. Finally, she even doubts that her impending baldness repels her husband. Identified with her husband's love, Mrs. Xi is distressed to see her dignity destroyed when Mr. Xi has an affair with another woman. However, unable to name a person totally responsible for Mr. Xi's adultery, she can only console her broken heart with strangers' sympathies.

Mrs. Tong 童太太 lives with her husband and his concubine. Though complaining about his unfaithfulness, she still saves him from his trouble:

> "The old guy stirred up some trouble and was sent to the county police station. I was almost panicked to death. Finally, it was me who tried to get him out of detention. I asked my goddaughter for some help. I had to follow her ways and spent seven thousand dollars. How pathetic I was—I took a rickshaw to the station. In darkness, the rickshaw rumbled on the peddle road. You know how bumpy the peddle roads are in Su province. The lanes are narrow and it is hard to find the direction in darkness. How pathetic I was! It would have served me right if I had fallen out of the rickshaw and died! I made such a great effort and finally he was released from the police station. Don't you think I should ask him what the situation was in the station and he should ask me how I got him out of it? Oh! As soon as he entered the house he rushed into the room of the concubine!" (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 5,* 108)

To demonstrate to the public what a virtuous wife she is, Mrs. Tong tells how she helps her husband who had hurt her heart when he was confronted with difficulties. People in the clinic who listened to the story respect her. But Mr. Tong shows no appreciation for her help and goes directly to his concubine for comfort.

To assuage the pain caused by the indifferent attitude of her husband, Mrs. Tong starts to recount her good deeds as an obedient daughter-in-law:

> Mrs. Tong sighed again and said, "So I always try to persuade my three daughters against marriage. What are the advantages they can get form marriage? When it comes to the problem about money, I am always the one who feels anxious about it. He never worries about it."
>
> Mrs. Xi joined the talk, laughing and saying, "Mrs. Tong, you are a superb woman."
>
> Mrs. Tong hit her palm with the fist of her hand, and [...] said with a resentful tone, "I have been married to him for thirty years. Do I not take care of everything in the family? When I was a newlywed, I had to get up even before the day broke. I had to bring water to my parents-in-law so they could wash their faces. I had to boil eggs and put them on the plates in an orderly fashion. Even if I had born children one after another, I still tried my best to serve my parents-in-law... Anyway, they always say I am a good daughter-in-law." Suddenly, she felt lonely and stopped talking. Her parents-in-law and the senior relatives in her husband's family who had tortured her so much and finally had appreciated her hard work had all passed away. However, she still got up before dawn everyday. She groped in the room as black as pitch, making rustling sounds. She touched the familiar items in the room and what was unfamiliar to her was the bitter and sour pain which, caused by the cold weather, kept gnawing the joints

> of her fingers. (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 5,* 109)

Mrs. Tong can only win her value as a dutiful daughter-in-law. Though her parents-in-law tormented her, at least they did not lose sight of her. However, since they have passed away, there is no one in the family who will pay attention to her. She keeps doing all the chores to prove that she is a conscientious wife. But Mrs. Tong is nearly overwhelmed by loneliness, as she becomes even worthless to her husband. As a result, Mrs. Tong misses her parents-in-law because their torments can attest to her fortitude and diligence. The pain in her fingers caused by the cold weather mirror the pangs in her heart caused by her husband's cold attitudes towards her.

Mrs. Tong then changes the topic and talks about her encounter with a monk in a temple:

> "Let me talk to you about the monk in the Jingguang temple. He is really good at fortunetelling. He asked me, 'Do you argue with your husband very often?' I said yes. Then he replied, 'Don't do this anymore. It's an evil destiny from your previous life. If you keep confronting him in this life, you will still be a couple in the next life and you will even suffer more then. In the next life, he won't spare you easily. He won't give you a penny!' I was scared to death! The old monk told me, 'Do believe me, Madame!' I put my palms together and said, 'Thank you, Master. I will hold your advice with both my hands and take it home!' From then on, I followed the monk's suggestions. I don't even speak loudly to my husband. I used to meddle in everything in his life, and he was afraid of me as if I were a killing weapon. But later on he is no longer afraid. He frequents the brothels and takes women home one after another. The situation has gotten

> worse now—it's all because I have loosened my grip of him too early!" She sighed. (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 5,* 110-11)

The unhappy marriage makes Mrs. Tong superstitious and readily dependent on the monk's words. While the monk devotes his life to Buddha, she dedicates hers to men. Eager to improve her relationship with her husband, she is also convinced that if it is hopeless for her to be loved in this life, she can still prevent things from getting worse in the next life. However, since Mr. Tong is free from his wife's control, he has become even more licentious. Mrs. Tong cannot help ruing over her wrong decisions. The religion of a monk cannot salvage the religion of a woman. Buddhist teachings preach that people should unshackle themselves from desires. Mrs. Tong, however, is still entangled in her desires for love.

The patients leave one after another. Toward the end of the story, Mrs. Xi sits alone by the window:

> Mrs. Xi turned her eyes away quickly and looked out of the window. As if she had been unfairly treated, in a mellow mood, she thought of her husband.
>
> "Someday in the future, as long as I can see him again… he will also know he has owed me a lot. As long as I can explain everything to him…"
>
> She consoled herself with thoughts like these. Then she picked up the newspapers. Her lips, like the beads of birds pecking at food, slightly swayed sideways as if she tried to hold back some emotions. She started reading the newspaper but did not agree with all the comments in it. Someday in the future her husband would come back to her. Don't come

> back too late—please don't come back too late! But don't come back too early either, because she had not recovered from baldness yet. (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 5,* 113)

Not reading the newspaper at all, Mrs. Xi's is still full of concerns about her husband. She expects that one day her husband will come back to her and repent for what he has done to her. She has already prepared to forgive him even before her husband goes back to her. However, Mrs. Xi worries that her thin hair will repulse her husband and drive him away again. With such poor self-esteem, she begs her husband to come back to her, but come back only when her appearance deserves his love.

Both Mrs. Xi and Mrs. Tong suffer because their husbands are attracted to other women and never feel grateful for their devotion. However, they are so committed to men's love that they always believe their husbands will come back to them and show their repentance. Deprived of love, they wait for it to come round again. Had there been the promise of love, they would have felt delighted even while waiting. Because "waiting can be a joy; to the woman who watches for her beloved in the knowledge that he is hesitating towards her, that he loves her, the wait is a dazzling promise" (de Beauvoir 672). As the title of the story suggests, in "Waiting," women spend their days waiting for love, for the grace from the men who ever disregard their faith.

As Irigaray argues, for a woman, to become the most desirable object in men's eyes awards her an incalculable value. Therefore, she harbors a religious passion for love and feels completed and recognized when the love of men is showered on her. Accordingly, in *Chuanqi*, the lives of women are marked by the vicissitudes derived from the presence or absence of love. Weilong sacrifices a great deal to beg for the love of a rake, while Chuanchang, Cynthia and Yanli project their minds into their weddings and marriages and imagine how they will be pampered by love. Growing up as mirthless daughters, Chang'an and Cuiyuan are ecstatic when falling in love. The insincere confession from Jize easily disarms Qiqiao's sadism. Mrs. Xi and Mrs. Tong idle their days away to wait for the privilege of their husbands' love. The stories in which the women stake their happiness and sadness on the patronage of love just reveal to readers how their faith in love can help them ascend into heaven or submerge them in hell.

## 7. Zhang Ailing and Luce Irigaray –A Comparative Study

As Grosz remarks, Irigaray's reading of Freud imparts how our society is controlled by phallic order:

> Freud develops a model of human subjectivity that represents all the variations of subjectivity only according to a singular (Western, capitalist, white, Eurocentric) male model. Femininity is always represented in some relation of dependence on this model, a lack or absence of the qualities characterizing masculinity. (*Sexual Subversions* 105)

Without representations of their own, women live in "a resolutely *homosexual* culture, a culture based on the primacy of the male, the *home,* who can function only with others modeled on himself, others who are his mirror reflections" (Grosz, *Sexual Subversions* 107). As a result, in a patriarchal society, the desires of men are transformed cosmetically into the definitions of femininity, which produce three roles of women. Deprived of her own language to delineate her individuality, a woman can only establish her identity by playing the roles approved by the values of men.

Accordingly, the diverse women in *Chuanqi* can be grouped into the roles of prostitutes, mothers and virgins. Prostitution refers to women who marry for economic reasons. Therefore, women become fetishists who adorn themselves with commodities to draw the attention of men, with whom they can trade their bodies for financial support. Mothers have to shoulder the responsibilities of bearing and rearing children, which indicates men's wish for the continuance of his genes. The praise of virginity reflects men's fear of adultery. Thus, to claim his ownership of a chaste and pure woman assures him that his offspring carry the same blood.

The brief review of Irigaray's theories demonstrates to us how the feminist reading of these stories illustrates that the world in *Chuanqi* is under the dominance of men, which disfranchises women from the right of self-definition. However, as Toril Moi points out, Irigaray's writing suggests her attempt to deconstruct the male discourse by miming it:

> One might well claim that Irigaray, in *Speculum*, is speaking as a woman miming male discourse [...]. If as a woman under patriarchy, Irigaray has, according to her own analysis, no language of her own but can only (at best) imitate male discourse, her own writing must inevitably be marked by this [...].
>
> [...] Here is a theatrical staging of the mime: miming the miming imposed on woman, Irigaray's subtle specular move ( her mimicry *mirrors* that of all women) intends to *undo* the effects of phallocentric discourse simply by *overdoing* them [...]. Irigaray's undermining of patriarchy through the overmiming of its discourse may be the one way out of the straitjacket of

> phallocentrism. (140)

Irigaray tries to deconstruct the "phallocentric discourse" by overdoing it. Her mimicking allows her to sneak into the phallic order and sneer at the absurdities of it. In *Chuanqi*, Zhang also disrupts the male discourse by mimicking the literature of Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies, also known as Butterfly literature.

According to Rey Chow, Butterfly literature emerged around the time of the May Fourth movement when "a large number of 'old school' novelists produced an extremely popular body of fiction by adhering to more traditional styles," contrary to the "progressive motifs" usually related to the movement (36). The narrow definition of Butterfly fiction is "love stories" which consist of "sentimental stories centering on the unfulfilled love between scholars (*cai zi*) and beauties (*jia ren*)" (Chow 36, 51). As C.T. Hsia gives *Chuanqi* its English name, *Romances*, and comments that "in many of the *Romances* the basic situation is a courtship, flirtation, or affair" (*A History of Modern Chinese Fiction* 397), Zhang's works are therefore connected to the Butterfly literature in terms of their focus on love.

Yang Zhao notices that Butterfly literature is dominated by male writers:

> The masters of Butterfly literature, from Xu Zhenya 徐枕亞, Li Hanqiu 李涵秋 to Zhou Shoujuan 周瘦鵑, Zhang Henshui 張恨水, are all male writers, but the protagonists in their stories are women. The works of Butterfly literature, like *gui yuan shi* 閨怨詩 (poems from the boudoir), are the collective discourses of Chinese men who speak for women and whose descriptions of female experiences are the results of their imaginations. ("Touguo Zhang Ailing Kan Renjian" 471)

The narrative tradition of Butterfly literature which allows men to express feelings for women is, however, reversed in Zhang's works. "While adopting the formula of Butterfly literature, Zhang changes the subject of imagination into a woman" (Yang Zhao, "Touguo Zhang Ailing Kan Renjian" 471). Moreover:

> as a female writer with her female experiences, she sneaks into the tradition of Butterfly literature. Her stories replace those invented by the imaginations of men. It is the first time that a woman, with an imposing attitude, dispossesses the male writers of their validity to speak for women and reclaims her right to portray women in Butterfly literature. (Yang Zhao, "Touguo Zhang Ailing Kan Renjian" 476)

Thus, the stories in *Chuanqi*, in the disguise of the tradition of Butterfly literature, are actually written from a female perspective which men are unable to reproduce in their works. In her writings, Zhang "maintains the subjective views of women by generating them from feminine sensitivity" (Yang Zhao, "Touguo Zhang Ailing Kan Renjian" 479).

Zhang never complies with the female characteristics fabricated by men's imagination. "She breaks the rule which orders women to follow the guidelines in the world of male literature" (Yang Zhao, "Touguo Zhang Ailing Kan Renjian" 479). Instead, by mimicking Butterfly literature, Zhang indeed examines the male gaze upon women. Through her female gazes, readers of *Chuanqi* are allowed to see, as Irigaray claims, how women are defined by a phallocentric specularization. Therefore, to apply Irigaray's theories to the reading of *Chuanqi*, on the one hand, demonstrates the similar attempts of both women to disrupt the male discourse by imitating it. On the other, it prompts us to further consider the possible disparity between postwar French theory and a prewar Chinese text.

A French feminist interpretation of Zhang's stories cannot avoid the challenge incurred by the different social and geographic backdrops between western literary theories and Chinese literary works. To disregard the difference will simply run the risk of taking the perspective of the white woman as the only "correct interpretation" for all the difficulties women around the world are confronted with. Consequently, the feminist theory will make "generalizations about 'third-world' women, assuming a homogeneity amongst very diverse groups of women and" replying on "a tokenist inclusion of" a few Chinese women "to represent" all Chinese women (Lewis and Mills 9). To prevent stereotyping all Chinese women and to elicit from *Chuanqi* a feminist concern which is unique to Zhang , except for the mimicry and mockery of the male discourses present in the works of both writers, we should also notice that while Irigaray aims to subvert the representational system of patriarchy by "the recategorisation of women and femininity so that they are now capable of being autonomously defined according to women's and not men's interests" (Grosz, *Sexual Subversions* 105), Zhang rather underplays or abstains from the intention of subversion. She assumes a decadent attitude which allows her to indulge in the happiness of being submissive.

Li Yu 李渝 is irritated by Zhang's inclination to degeneracy, by which she disqualifies her as a feminist writer:

> As a storyteller, Zhang has never thought of or ever tried to disentangle herself from degeneracy [...]. Though her narration is equipped with a nonchalant and objective view, the tone is full of self-indulgence. Overwhelmed by self-indulgence, she can even sink into the states of sadism and masochism. Not only does she not regain her dignity, on the

> contrary, she is, step by step but still composed, trapped in the same degeneracy as her characters, together falling into the hopeless abyss. There are only pathetic people in her stories, and they are by no means lovable [...]. [The female protagonists] are "subdued," to borrow the term from Su Qing 蘇青, but as long as they continue the journey of degeneracy, we may say that they experience "the joy of being subdued." Trapped in their tragic lives, they do not intend to fight back like a tragic heroine [...].
>
> [...] If we think Zhang does speak for some women, her indulgence in self-abuse might only arouse the oppositions from feminists. (242)

Acutely aware that women around the world are "put in a position of inferiority" (A. Zhang, *Zhang Ailing Quanji 15,* 95), Zhang, however, thinks little about radical rebellion against patriarchal rules. Instead, she takes a more compromising step in the face of the unfair treatment of women, which contributes to the aesthetics of submission in her works. What transpires from this aesthetics is the attempt to embellish and poeticize the compliance of women.

As Zhang remarks, when you see a woman scoop water from a water vat and "look at the reflection of her face on the surface of water stored in a dark yellow vat decorated with the relief of small yellow dragons, you will think of millions of women from the past to the present who cultivate the taste to see the reflection of their appearances while scooping water from the vat" (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 15,* 96). It is a woman's deferential fortitude to amuse herself by connecting the daily chores to the pleasure of appreciating their beauty in water that transforms her submission into a tender attitude of composure. Moreover, it is Zhang's deep indulgence in the "joy of being subdued" that brings forth the subtle and nuanced portrayals of the struggle, sorrow, and trivial happiness of women who, unable to paper over their sufferings, find themselves too weak to be shorn of the phallocentric civilization with which they are identified and in which their desires for love could be fulfilled. The vacillation between the attachment to and discontentment with a culture one is emotionally indebted to not only reflects the dilemma women in *Chuanqi* are confronted with, but also refers to the ambivalence of Zhang's obsession with China, which will become the topic of chapter four.

# Chapter Two

## A Lacanian Reading of Three Stories in *Chuanqi*— "The Jasmine Tea", "In the Years of Youth" and "Red Rose and White Rose"

The aim of this chapter is to explore the symbolic worlds of Zhang Ailing and the characters in three stories in *Chuanqi*, and to demonstrate how their tragedies result from the inevitability of fantasies morphing into disillusions.

The chapter is divided into six parts. The first one examines Lacan's theory about symbolic order, which will be the approach applied to the studies of two autobiographic essays by Zhang and three short stories from part two to part five. The final section will involve a discussion of the relationship between fantasy and disillusion.

The premise of my argument is based on Lacan's assumption that one's consciousness is under the rule of a symbolic order, by which a person learns to project his/her desires as fantasies that will be condensed and transferred into signifiers. The signifiers are then forced upon people who are supposed to fulfill these desires. However, Lacan also asserts that there is always a rupture between the signifier and the signified. The correspondence between the signifier and the signified is an illusion one can have only in the imaginary order but one has to lose in the symbolic world.

The illusionary correspondence witnesses the sufferings Zhang endures in her life when her mother, the signifier of the promises of the western world Zhang aspires for, turns into a woman irritated by her financial straits. The writer's personal experience is then transformed into the keynotes of these stories. In "The Jasmine

Tea," Yan Ziye 言子夜 is taken as representing the respectable and courtly father Nie Chuanqing 聶傳慶 longs for. But he is disillusioned when Yan Ziyi humiliates him in front of his classmates. "In the Years of Youth" tells the story of Pan Ruliang, a student of medicine who is secretly in love with a Russian girl, Cynthia, the person who he imagines will realizes his dreams for a noble and dignified life outside China. The fact that Cynthia is an unattractive and slovenly woman soon puts an end to his fantasies. In "Red Rose and White Rose," Tong Zhenbao, a man confident in the full command of his life is shaken when his mistress, the red rose who should signify the characteristics of a passionate but licentious woman, is genuinely in love with him. In contrast, his wife, the white rose who is identified as a virtuous and chaste woman, commits adultery with a tailor.

In conclusion, the mismatch between the signifier and the signified not only informs us of the difference between the imaginary order and the symbolic order, but also indicates the unbridgeable gap between fantasy and reality. Desires are too insatiable to be fulfilled, and people who try to play out their fantasies in reality are destined to be confronted with disillusions.

## 1. A Symbolic Universe, the Work of Metaphor and the Disjunction between the Signifier and the Signified

According to Jacques Lacan, human beings are under the dominance of a symbolic order. One's linguistic activity is controlled by the signifying system. Therefore, we can express our conscious and unconscious desires only by means of signifiers. Following Lacan's words, "the human world, the world that we know and live, in the midst of which we orient ourselves, and without which we are absolutely unable to orientate ourselves, doesn't only imply the existence of meanings, but the order of the signifiers as well" (*The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book III* 189). Moreover, the speaker as a subject does not posses the signifier, but rather "it is the signifier that determines the subject" (Homer 47). In other words, one's subjectivity is defined by the signifier designated to him and, as Bruce Fink elaborates, the signifiers can be recognized as our names:

> The empty set as the subject's place-holder within the symbolic order is not unrelated to the subject's proper name. That name, for example, is a signifier which has often been selected long before the child's birth, and which inscribes the child in the symbolic. A priori, this name has absolutely nothing to do with the subject—it is as foreign to him or her as any other signifier. But in time this signifier—more, perhaps, than any other—will go to the root of his or her being and become inextricably tied to his or her subjectivity. It will become the signifier of his or her very absence as subject, standing in for him or her. (*Reading Seminar XI* 80)

Accordingly, the signifier becomes the representative of a subject. It describes the individuality of a person, and "this is all the more necessary in that, before he disappears as subject beneath the signifier which he becomes, due to the simple fact that it addresses him, he is absolutely nothing" (Lacan, *Reading Seminar XI* 265). Thus, in a symbolic world, a signifier substantiates the existence of a subject, and it "makes manifest the subject of its signification. But it functions as a signifier only to reduce the subject in question to being no more than a signifier" (Lacan, *The Seminar of Lacques Lacan Book I* 207). As a result, as Bruce Fink argues, "the subject is completely submerged by language, his or her only trace being a place-maker or place-holder in the symbolic order" and "the signifier is what founds the subject—the signifier is what wields ontic clout, wresting existence from the real that it marks and annuls" (*Reading Seminars I and II* 80).

Lacan's theory about the symbolic order which affiliates the identity of a person to a signifier helps to explain the symbolic worlds of the characters in these three stories of *Chuanqi.* It pertains to how Nie Chuanqing, Pan Ruliang and Tong Zhenbao shape their desires in terms of the signifiers. To shape one's desires into signifiers is to convey the desires in metaphorical phrases. Lacan also reports the link between Roman Jakobson's ideas about metaphor and metonymy and Freud's interpretation of dreams to explain the connection between signifiers and metaphors. While metonymy refers to the activity of displacement, the invention of a metaphor requires one's mind to be engaged in the work of condensation, which "designates the process whereby two or more signs or images in a dream are combined to form a composite image that is then invested with the meaning of both its constitutive elements" (Homer 43). Condensation denotes a process in which people narrow the variety of their desires and transfer them into to a single signifier. In Lacan's words, "the transference of the signified, so essential to human life, is possible only by virtue of the structure of the signifier" and the signifying process is "the constant life of metaphor in these transferences of signified" (*The Seminar of Lacques Lacan, Book III* 226, 222). Hence, during the process of transference, the function of the metaphor is equal to that of the signifier, the outcome of the condensation of one's desires.

As Lacan remarks, "the supposed realism of describing the reality by details is only conceivable in the register of an organized signifier." Moreover, "the coordination of signifiers has to be possible before transferences of the signified are able to take place. The formal articulation of the signifier predominates with respect to transference of the signified" (*The Seminar of Jacques Lacan* 229). Accordingly, the transference of the signified is possible only when the signifiers are clearly articulated. Taking Freud's daughter as an example, Lacan describes how Anna Freud talks in her sleep and names a list of food. This case study illustrates how she is going through the phase of the formal articulation of the signifiers, before the transferences of the signified form in her mind:

> *Big strawberries, raspberries, cakes, porridge...*
>
> There's no doubt that she desires these strawberries, these raspberries. But it isn't self-evident that these objects should all be there together. The fact that they are there, juxtaposed, [and] coordinated in this articulated naming is due to the positional function that places them in a situation of equivalence [...].With the name of the person, *Anna Freud.* She is an infant of nineteen months, and we are at the level of naming, of equivalence, of normal coordination, of signifying articulation as such. It's only within this framework that the transference of naming is possible. (*The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book III* 227-28)

Anna is too young to be able to use metaphors. She has not had the ability to condense her desires and transfer them into a single signifier. She is at the stage of "only metonymy" ( Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan* 228), in which the names of the food emerge as the cognitive labels for a whole concept, that is, her desires for food.

In Zhang Ailing's three stories, characters' expectations for life are articulated through their fantasies which can be condensed and transferred into a single signifier, the synthesis of their desires. In "The Jasmine Tea," Chuanqing's desires for a happy family and a healthy life are concentrated and transferred to the signifier of a good father, which is imposed upon his professor, Yan Ziye. Pan Ruliang, the medical student in "In the Years of Youth," transfers his desires for love, marriage and a civilized way of life to the signifier of an ideal foreign woman, while the Russian girl, Cynthia, becomes the place-holder of this signifier. In "Red Rose and White Rose," Zhenbao compares his mistress and wife respectively to a red rose and a white rose. The subjectivity of Jiaorui is defined by the signifier of the red rose, the condensation and transference of his desires for a passionate and voluptuous woman, while the signifier of the white rose stands for Yanli, the condensation and transference of his desires for a virtuous wife and a world of strict morals.

However, Lacan argues that there is always a disjunction between the signifier and the signified. As the signifier does not correspond to the signified, people do not act in accordance with the signifiers that define them. Unlike the linguist, Saussure, who claims that the signifier and the signified are "always inextricably bound together—like two sides of a sheet of paper—and cannot be separated" (Homer 40), Lacan contends that "what a signifier refers to is not a signified, as there is always a barrier between them, but to another signifier" (42). For Saussure, to divide the signifier from the signified is as impossible as to separate two sides of a sheet of paper. Therefore, he suggests that there is "at least a parallelism between the signified and the signifier" and "the signifier does not exist without the signified, and vice versa" (Nobus 53-54). On the contrary, Lacan advocates that the rupture between the signifier and the signified "should be read as a 'real border, that is to say for leaping, between the floating signifier and the flowing signified'" (qtd. in *The Cambridge Companion to Lacan* 53). Thus, "the meaning" of a word "is not fixed," because "as Lacan puts it, there is 'an incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier'" (qtd. in Homer 42). Applying Lacan's theory to his anthropological research, Levi-Strauss concludes that "no signifier ever 'fits a signified perfectly, human beings doing their utmost to distribute the available signifiers across the board of signifieds without ever creating a perfect match'" (Nobus 55). The words by Levi-Strauss are the acceptance of Lacan's concept that the signifier is always incompatible with the signified.

The disjunction between the signifier and the signified also refers to the differences between the imaginary order and the symbolic order, and between one's ego and one's subject, which can be respectively compared to the subject of enunciation and the subject of utterance. The imaginary order concerns the experience in which one discovers his subjectivity. An infant usually has a fragmentary concept of its subjectivity as it can only see parts of its body, such as its legs and arms, but not its head and back. The fragmentation disappears when it sees its whole body in the mirror and is identified with it. "Through seeing its image in the mirror," the infant has the sense of "completeness and mastery" over its body, and "the mirror image, therefore, anticipates the mastery of the infant's own body and stands in contrast to the feelings of fragmentation the infant experiences" (Homer 24, 25). But what an infant has been identified with is actually an image outside itself. Thus:

> The image is *alienating* in the sense that it becomes confused with the self. The image actually comes to take the place of the self. Therefore, the sense of a unified self is acquired at the price of this self being an-other, that is, our mirror image [...].
>
> Lacan insists that the ego is based on an illusory image of wholeness and mastery and it is the function of the ego to maintain this illusion of coherence and mastery. The function of the ego is, in other words, one of

> *mis-recognition*; of refusing to accept the truth of fragmentation and alienation. (Homer 25)

Accordingly, the unity of the self an infant recognizes is an imaginary concept derived from the image outside of its body. The imaginary order, thus, suggests that "the imaginary is the realm of the ego, a pre-linguistic realm of sense perception, identification and an illusory sense of unity" (Homer 31).

The delusion of a unified self developed in the mirror stage can also infer the discrepancy between the concepts of an ego and a subject. As Homer expounds:

> the ego is an 'imaginary function', formed primarily through the subject's relationship to their own body. The subject, on the other hand, is constituted in the symbolic order and is determined by language. There is always a disjunction, according to Lacan, between the subject of enunciation and the subject of the utterance; in other words, the subject who speaks and the subject who is spoken [...].
>
> [...] This is what Lacan means when he says *I* is an other, that is to say, 'I' is not 'me'; those two terms do not refer to the same entity; the subject is not the same as the individual person. (45)

The disparity between "I", the subject who speaks, and "me", the object who is spoken to, demonstrates the dual nature of one's consciousness, the division of every consciousness into the perceiving "I" and the perceived "me" and the impossibility of the coherence of them within a self.

Moreover, the disjunction between an ego and a subject also informs us of the distinction between the imaginary order and the symbolic order:

> As the sense of original unity and coherence in the mirror phase is an illusion, there is a fundamental disharmony regarding the ego. The ego is essentially a terrain of conflict and discord, a site of continual struggle. What Lacan refers to as a "lack of being" is this ontological gap or primary loss at the very heart of our subjectivity. Lacan goes further, however, than just suggesting that we have lost an original sense of unity; he argues that this loss is constitutive of subjectivity itself. In short, the imaginary is a realm of identification and mirror-reflection; a realm of distortion and illusion. It is a realm in which a futile struggle takes place in the part of the ego to once more attain an imaginary unity and coherence. (Homer 31)

According to Homer, the concept of one's ego as a unified self only subsists in the imaginary order, while one's subjectivity, constructed in the symbolic order, registers the dichotomy of a self. The disunity of a self then can be connected to that between the signifier and the signified. As Lacan notes, "everything which is human has to be ordained within a universe constituted by the symbolic function" (*The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book II* 29). But people still crave for the imaginary ego which is rejected in the symbolic order. Therefore, to be deluded by the unity of a self and the compatibility between the signifier and the signified illustrates the fruitless effort of people struggling to recover in a symbolic world the sense of coherence that only exists in the mirror stage. In addition, the disharmony between the imaginary order and the symbolic order draws our attention to the gap between fantasy and reality. It also foreshadows how the illusions of Chuanqing, Ruliang and Zhenbao, which function to satisfy their desires, are destined to be disillusioned.

Lacan's work formulates the idea that "to be fully human we are *subjected* to this symbolic order," and everything is "ordered, or structured, in accordance with these symbols and the laws of the symbolic, *including* the unconscious and human subjectivity" (Homer 44). Whereupon, in this chapter, the study of the symbolic order aims to display how the worlds of Chuanqing, Ruliang and Zhenbao are established by signifiers. They express their desires in the form of signifiers, with which they define people who are supposed to act out their fantasies. These characters are the subjects who occupy "an essentially narcissistic relation" to the signifier and assume "it is they who possess the signifier." Nevertheless, it is the signifier "that possesses the subject" (Homer 48). Therefore, as they impose the signifiers upon others, they are the ones determined and controlled by these signifiers, and the signifier-takers are only the reflections of the mentalities of the signifier-inventors. When the actions of people do not match the signifiers forced upon them, the disjunction between the signifier and the signified suggests itself. What ensues is the collapse of the symbolic worlds of Chuanqing, Ruliang and Zhenbao.

## 2. The Symbolic World in Zhang Ailing's Life

Besides creating symbolic worlds in the short stories, Zhang also lived a life full of signifiers. In her essay "Siyu" 私語 (Whispers), she describes how her world is divided into two symbols of diametrical opposition, the one of brightness and the other of darkness. The signifier of the bright world is her mother, while her father defines the world of murkiness:

> My mother was gone, but something of her atmosphere lingered in my aunt's house: an exquisitely carved table with an interlocking "puzzle-

> piece" mosaic on top, gentle pastel colors, wonderful people whose lives were beyond my ken constantly bustling in and out the front door. All the best things I knew, be they spiritual or material, were contained in those rooms [...].
>
> On the other side was my father's house. I looked down on everything there: opium, the old tutor who taught my little brother to write his "Discourse on the First Emperor of the Han Dynasty," old-style linked-chapter fiction, languorous, ashen, dust-laden living. Like a Persian worshipping at the altar of fire, I forcibly divided the world into two halves: bright and dark, good and evil, god and the devil. Whatever belonged to my father's side was bad. (*Written on Water* 156)

The world of Zhang's father is the epitome of the decadent life of people living in the early Republican years when China was too weak to defend against western aggression. He symbolizes China at the turn of the century: lethargic and impotent, gloomy and bleak, refusing to face reality; he only idles the days away smoking opium. His room is characteristic of "clouds of opium smoke, hovering like a fog over an untidy room strewn with stacks of tabloids." When Zhang "sat there for a long time," she "would always feel that" she "was sinking deeper and deeper into its meshes" (A. Zhang, *Written on Water* 156). However, the world that belongs to her mother is a total contrast. She stands for the positive side of the West, a world of vitality and promises. She also lives up to her image as a progressive free spirit when she divorces her father and goes to England to study, a decision that makes her a Chinese woman much ahead of her time.

While her mother embarks upon a new journey in her life, her father further destroys his life by marrying an opium addict. His second marriage enshrouds his house with the smell and smoke of opium:

> My new stepmother was also an opium smoker. After the marriage, we moved to a western-style house in the style of the early Republic, which had originally been our own family property [...].The sunny corners of the house set one dozing, and the shady spots had the desolate chill of an ancient tomb. The dark, green-tinted heart of the house was wakeful, a strange world unto itself. And at the border where light and shade met, you could see the sun outside, hear the tinkle of the streetcar bells, and even listen to the sound of musicians inside a discount fabric shop playing "Oh, Susanna" over and over again. Even in the sunlight, one could only doze. (*Written on Water* 157)

Her father's house is a world located between light and shade. It is on the borderline between purgatory and hell, between the world of human beings and that of ghosts. With the air of fuzziness spreading all over the house, everything looks so confusing that it is hard to tell the line between life and death. Haunted by the inanition of a house which is likened to "an ancient tomb" and as inert as if they were already dead, people cannot help spending their lives dozing off.

Afraid that her future will be buried in this tomb, Zhang stakes all the expectations for life on her fantasies about her mother's world:

> On the positive side, I was full of vast ambitions and expansive plans. After high school, I would go to England to study. There was one period during which I determined that I was going to learn how to make animated

> movies as a means of introducing Chinese painting to the United States. I wanted to make an even bigger splash than Lin Yutang. I wanted to wear only the most exquisite and elegant clothing, to roam the world, to have my own house in Shanghai, to live a crisp and unfettered existence. (*Written on Water* 156)

The desire for a footloose and uninhibited life encourages Zhang to escape from her father's house and stay with her mother. Entering the world of brightness, Zhang, however, soon debunks the delusive side of her plans as her mother betrays the signifier of a carefree and delightful western life.

Zhang starts to suffer from the pain of disillusionment when she comes into conflict with her mother because of financial problems. To ask for an allowance from her mother becomes one of the most humiliating experiences in her life. In another essay, "Tongyan Wuji" 童言無忌 (From the Mouths of Babes), she gives a poignant portrayal of the inevitable embarrassment incurred by the issue of money:

> At first, the act of asking my mother for money had a fascinating, intimate charm. This was because I had always loved my mother with a passion bordering on the romantic. She was a beautiful and sensitive woman, and I had had very little opportunity to be with her because she had gone abroad when I was four, coming home only infrequently and going away again soon after each visit. Through a child's eyes, she seemed a distant and mysterious figure. There were a couple of times she took me out when, merely by taking my hand in hers as we crossed the street, she would send an unfamiliar thrill through my body. But later, despite the straits in which she found herself, I had to press her for money every second or third day.

> The torments I suffered on account of her temper and my own ingratitude little by little extinguished my love for her in a stream of petty mortifications, until nothing was left of it. (*Written on Water* 4)

The sporadic contacts with her mother in her childhood inspire Zhang to create a perfect image of her. Beautiful but distant and mysterious, the woman in Zhang's imagination smacks of the features of a movie star, a stranger whose occasional visits can gladden her heart. However, as she becomes familiar with her mother, her romantic fascination is also devoured by the practical concern of money.

Toward the end of "Whispers," Zhang is flustered and puzzled by the looming fact that her mother will depart from the signifier she imposes on her:

> I had grown used to being alone at my father's house, which produced in me an abrupt desire to grow up and be responsible for myself. To play the sheltered daughter in straitened circumstances seemed a terrible burden. At the same time, I could see that my mother had sacrificed quite a lot for me and that she doubted whether I was worth the sacrifice. I shared her doubts. I often went all alone to the top of the apartment building to take a solitary walk around the roof. The white stucco Spanish walls cut sharp lines across the blue of the sky, shearing the world into two. I would lift my face to the fierce sun above, standing exposed before the sky and its judgment and, like every confused adolescent, hang suspended between overweening pride and intense self-loathing.
>
> It was from that time onward that my mother's house was no longer full of tenderness. (*Written on Water* 161)

No longer complacent about her ambitious plans for her prosperous future, Zhang paces back and forth, anxious and confused, wondering whether she is worth all the sacrifices her mother made. She is captivated by the sense of uncertainty caused by the shattering of her dreams based on the longing for an exciting life outside China. However, the rupture between her mother as the signifier of the flourishing western world and her mother as a woman irritated by poverty leads to the collapse of Zhang's symbolic world and deprives her mother's house of the warmth that once urged her to flee away from her father's world.

In two of Zhang's essays where she feasts her readers with the episodes of her personal life, it is worth noting that she defines her mother and father by two antithetical symbols. While her mother is connected to a world of light, good and god, her father is identified with a world of darkness, evil and the devil. The sleepy, languid and ghastly atmosphere that pervades her father's house concludes with a signifier —a father whose life is the documentary of a Chinese opium addict. By contrast, Zhang's aspirations for an uninhibited life and her ambition to establish herself in a foreign country are transferred into a contrary signifier—a mother whose life is marked by her romantic adventure to the western world. The symbolic world that lives in Zhang's life is also adapted by herself for the short story, "The Jasmine Tea."

### 3. The Symbolic World in "The Jasmine Tea"

The protagonist of the story, Nie Chuanqing, grows up in a house that is almost the counterpart to that of Zhang's father's house as described above:

> His was a large house. When his family moved in after coming from

> Shanghai, the garden of the house was decorated by trees covered with blossoms. But within two to three years, the plants were either withered, or dead, or chopped off. Now, when the sun shone in the garden, there was nothing but bleakness.
>
> [...] Inside the house, the hallway was dark. People could only see sunlight reflecting on the rail of the stairway which wound its way to the upper floor. (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 6,* 10)

Before the Nie family moved in, the garden is still flush with the liveliness of plants. However, afterwards, the plants are all uprooted. The house, standing gaunt and empty like "an ancient tomb," enshrouds the inanimate souls of people who live here. It is so dark inside that people outside the house can hardly see anything. The darkness also isolates the Nie family from the outside world. While still alive, they are buried in this house, and the wilted plants in the garden are the reflections of their death-like lives.

Chuanqing's father, Nie Jiechen 聶介臣, conveys an impression resembling that of Zhang's father. He is also an opium addict. After Chuanqing's mother passes away, he marries an opium smoker:

> His father, Nie Jiechen, wore an undershirt with a silvery blue satin vest full of greasy spots on top of it. His stepmother was in total black. With her hair scattered around, she lay opposite to his father on the opium-smoking couch. He stepped forward and said, "Father! Mother! " Both of them snorted without any reply as they did not care much about his greeting [...].

> [...] His stepmother was in a good mood today. She took a sip of tea from the mouth of a small gilded tea pot. Her face puckered into a smile and she asked, "Chuanqing, do you have a girlfriend at school?" His father replied, "Him? He does not even have male friends. He does not deserve any girlfriends." His stepmother laughed and said, "Chuanqing, let me ask you. People said a girl surnamed Yan, who is also from Shanghai, is chasing you. Is that true?" Chuanqing blushed and replied, "Yan Danzhu 言丹朱—she has lots of friends. How could she set her eyes upon me?" His father said, "Who ever said she set her eyes upon you? She only sets her eyes upon your money. Upon you? Because of you? You are half human and half ghost." (*Zhang Ailing Quanji6,* 10-12)

Nie Jiechen is described wearing a "vest full of greasy spots"; dirty clothes that only beggars or vagabonds would wear. Both his father and stepmother are like parasites, lying on the bed all day long and feeding on opium, indifferent to Chuanqing's life. They do not even want to make any effort in replying to his greetings. They talk to him only when trying to tease and humiliate him. Living without parental love, Chuanqing becomes a skeletal, silent and somber person. Even his father cannot ignore his spectral look. Tortured by his parents, Chuanqing has turned out to be a ghost, staying in the house which entombs all the prospects of his life. Nie Jiechen symbolizes the world in this house, a world full of swirling opium smoke, a world where even the flourishing flowers cannot survive, a world where everyone is like a walking corpse, and a world which remind us of the evil and dismal one belonging to Zhang's father. The corruption and decadence of this world transform Chuanqing's father into the signifier of a despicable father who wastes away his life on opium.

Like Zhang who revolts against everything in her father's house, Chuanqing also wants to disconnect himself from his father. However, he is raised on the smoky air of the house. He is so used to the gloomy darkness in his father's world that gradually he abandons himself to a languished life, idling his days away in daydreaming. One day, he tries to find some magazines stored in a case in his room. But after rummaging for a while and finally remembering that the magazines were lost when they moved in, he just leans his head against the case with both his arms pressed under the lid of it:

> He left his arms caught in the case, tightly pressed under the lid. He hung his head, as if his neck was broken. The collar of his blue lined robe was vertically set. The warm sunlight penetrated the collar and reached the dented part of his neck. But he was captivated by a strange feeling. He felt it was almost dark—it had already gone dark. He waited in front of the window alone. The day in his heart also turned into darkness. There was an indescribable feeling of dim melancholy... He felt as if he was in a dream. The person who waited in front of the window was, at first, himself, but after a moment, he saw it clearly. It was his mother. A long fringe covered her forehead. She bowed her head. The lower part of her face was sharp, like a dot of white shadow [...].
>
> [...] She was there, waiting for someone, waiting for a message. But she knew the message would never come. The day in her heart dimmed gradually... He had a sudden, painful convulsion. He could not tell whether the person was himself or his mother. (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 6,* 13-14)

Chuanqing behaves like a paralyzed person. Too lethargic to remove his arms, he simply leaves them pressed under the lid of the case. Listlessly, he lowers his head, and his neck looks broken as if someone had strangled him. Although the sunlight may bring warmth to his body, it does not light up the sky in his heart. It remains as dusky as the house he lives in. Wanting in love and care, he turns to his dead mother, Feng Biluo 馮碧落, for consolation. Chuanqing imagines that he waits for his mother in front of the window, from which the sunshine will come and visit his heart. However, the image of his late mother also bows her head, as helpless and hopeless as he is. Like Chuanqing, she is also expecting someone, the person who can dispel the darkness in her heart and rescue her from the "dim melancholy" that wrenches her. Chuanqing is unable to distinguish himself from his late mother, because both of them suffer in the Nie family.

Chuanqing lost his mother when he was only four. "He knew very little about her. He knew she never loved his father. For this reason, his father hated her. After she was dead, his father enacted his revenge on Chuanqing" (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 6,* 14). But a rumor says that Feng Biluo was once in love with Yan Ziye, the professor of Chinese at the college Chuanqing attends. But the Feng family had turned down the proposal as Yan Ziye was still a young student who had not yet achieved anything. Yan Ziye failed to persuade Feng Biluo to elope with him. Humiliated and furious, he went abroad to study. When he returned, Feng Biluo had already married Nie Jiechen and was entrapped within an unhappy marriage and then dying young:

> Chuanqing did not dare to think about her martial life. She was not a bird in a cage. The bird in a cage would fly away when the door was open. She was the bird embroidered on a screen, a white bird among the golden lined clouds. After so many years, her feathers were dim, mouldy, and eaten by

> worms. In death, she died on the screen. She was dead. Her life had finished. But Chuanqing was still here. Why should he suffer like her? She was married into the Nie family, but at least she was aware of her sacrifice. Chuanqing was born in the Nie family. He did not have any choice. There was another bird on the screen. Even if he were dead, he could still not fly away from the screen. He had lived with his father for twenty years. He had been made mentally crippled. Even if he were free, he could not escape.
>
> Unable to escape! Unable to escape! If it was totally hopeless, he would just abandon himself to despair. But now, for the first time, he pieced together all the fragmentary rumors and assumptions, and made a complete story. He then realized that, twenty years ago, before he was born, he might have been able to escape. It had been possible for his mother to marry Yan Ziye. There were only a few steps from the realization of this dream. He almost became the child of Yan Ziye, and the brother of Yan Danzhu. Maybe he was Yan Danzhu. If he existed, she should disappear. (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 6,* 16-17)

Both Chuanqing and Feng Biluo wait in front of the window for the same person, Yan Ziye. He projects an image contrary to that of Nie Jiechen. For Feng Biluo, he is the signifier of a romantic love and the rebellion against her dominating family. For Chuanqing, he symbolizes an honorable father and a happy family life. Moreover, like Zhang's mother, Yan Ziye also received a good education in a foreign country. Therefore, the comparison between Yan Ziye and Nie Jiechen is involved in more complicated factors. They are not only the contrastive signifiers of respectable and despicable fathers. They are also the representatives of a professor educated outside China and an opium addict living in China. Respectively, they stand for the progressive foreign world and the deteriorating Chinese society, the same signifiers Zhang imposes upon her mother and father. Engrossed by his fantasies about Yan Ziye, Chuanqing even imagines that if Feng Biluo had been courageous enough to run away with him, he would have been the child of the a esteemed professor. However, in reality, Yan Danzhu occupies his longed for position. Thus, he harbors bitter resentment towards Danzhu, especially when he realizes he is inferior to her physically and psychologically.

At the beginning of the story, Chuanqing runs into Danzhu on a bus. The description of their looks highlights the sharp differences between their figures. Danzhu is as suntanned and energetic as a boy, while Chuanqing, like a girl suffering from chronic illness, is fragile and pale:

> On the seat at the back of the bus was Nie Chuanqing, a boy about the age of twenty. Although he was only twenty, the corners of his eyes and mouth registered the condition of an old man. Meanwhile, his narrow shoulders and long, thin neck made him look like an immature boy about only sixteen or seventeen years old. He wore a blue satin robe, with a pile of books in his arm. He sat sideways on the seat and his head leaned against the window. His Mongolian style face was in the shape of a goose egg. His eyebrows were thin and the corner of his eyes curved upwards. The flowers that glowed with the rosy color of satin set off his feminine beauty.
>
> Suddenly, the bus stopped. He opened his eyes and saw one of his classmates get on the bus. She was Yan Danzhu, the daughter of his

> professor, Yan Ziye [...].
>
> [...] She had a round face. The constant sunbathing made her complexion look like pure gold. Her eyebrows were thick and her eyes were soft. She was short and chubby. (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 6,* 6-7)

Though Chuanqing is only twenty years old, the tribulations he undergoes in his family makes him look like an aged man. Too emaciated to straighten up, he can only rest his head on the window. His thin eyebrows, in contrast to the thick ones of Danzhu, together with his oval face reveal his effeminacy, which not only serves as a foil to the masculine features of Danzhu, but also reminds readers of his wish to replace her and become the daughter of Yan Ziye.

Outgoing and passionate like an extroverted boy, Danzhu tries to strike up a conversation with Chuanqing, but he is as quiet and withdrawn as an introverted girl, hardly replying to her questions:

> Chuanqing turned his head away and kept silent. He leaned his face on the glass of the window [...].
>
> Danzhu—he did not understand her. She never lacked friends. Though she had only studied in Nanhua University for half a year, she had already become one of the most popular beauties in the school. Why was she willing to be acquainted with him? He leered at her. She was dressed in a tight white knit vest which shaped her ample bosom and small waist into a plastered bust. He turned his head away again, leaning and rubbing his forehead against the window. He did not like to see girls, especially

> healthy and beautiful girls, because they made him even more dissatisfied with himself. (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 6,* 8)

Danzhu's full bosom, the opposite of the slenderness of Chuanqing, demonstrates that she has a well-developed body. Moreover, her beauty and cheerfulness, on the one hand, attracts the adoration of her fellow students, but on the other, aggravates Chuanqing's negative perception of himself: his self-pity and self-hatred. Thus, rather than being encouraged by her greeting, Chuanqing turns his head away, declining to join the healthy world that belongs to her. He rubs his forehead against the window, as if he wants to drill a hole in the glass and shove himself through it, in order to escape from a world where there are healthy and charming girls who remind him of his defects. The contrast between their physiques also refers to another binary opposition between East and West, traditional and modern stereotyping. Chuanqing is the pale, fragile and somewhat sickly looking representative of traditional Chinese masculinity, whereas Danzhu is very westernized in dress and appearance, and especially her suntan which corresponds to western notions of femininity. Danzhu is threatening to Chuanqing in that she is identified with the powerful West while he is the signifier of the feeble East.

To be aware that he is no match for Danzhu only makes Chuanqing more addicted to Yan Ziye. The addiction then nourishes his fantasies about him:

> Yan Ziye looked pale and a little bit thin. Most men become really attractive after they reach thirty, and Yan Ziye was one of them. To take a rough guess, he should be over forty. But he looked much younger than he was.

> Yan Ziye came into the classroom and stepped onto the platform. Chuanqing felt as if he had never seen him before. This was the first time Chuanqing discovered the mournful beauty unique to people who wore the Chinese-style long gowns. Short of money, Chuanqing wore a long robe. But, like most young people, he preferred a suit. However, the large grey silk gown and pleated slacks, when it was put on Yan Ziye, made more eminent the fineness of his figure. Chuanqing could not help imagining: if he were the child of Yan Ziye, would he look like him? To eighty or ninety percent, he would be like him, because he was a boy. He was different from Yan Danzhu. (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 6,* 17-18)

The image of Yan Ziye differs extensively from that of Chuanqing's father. While Nie Jiechen is described wearing "a silvery blue satin vest full of greasy spots" which connects his slovenly appearance to that of vagabonds, Yan Ziye's dress conveys a "mournful beauty," the noble attraction belonging to him, who stands firm when being humiliated by the family of Feng Biluo and drifting in a foreign country for so many years. The infatuation with Yan Ziye envelops Chuanqing's mind and also triggers his competition with Danzhu. He presumes that he would be a more outstanding child. While Yan Ziye signifies a scholarly father, he will symbolize a reputable son. These two signifiers ensure the integrity of the symbolic world in Chuanqing's mind. Furthermore, Chuanqing identifies himself with Yan Ziye being somewhat pale and fragile, wearing a traditional Chinese gown. In this respect, his attempt to become Yan Ziye's son is also an attempt to justify a new generation of traditional Chinese males who have been abroad and have the knowledge of foreign things, but who have maintained certain elements of Chinese masculinity. But the fact that such people who have daughters like Danzhu, rather than sons like

Chuanqing, indicates that such justification is only imaginary.

Danzhu has once revealed to Chuanqing that Yan Ziye is actually a stubborn and irritable man, implying that whoever marries him will not end up in a happy life. But Chuanqing simply refuses to accept these unpleasant characters, for if Yan Ziye does not correspond to the signifier imposed upon him by Chuanqing, the illusion he relies on will be shattered. Therefore, Chuanqing convinces himself that the occasional arguments in marriage will only help in shaping his dynamic personality:

> Minor worries and petty trials would only help him adopt serious perspectives about life. Chuanqing believed that if he were the child of Ziye and Biluo, he would be deeper and more brooding than Danzhu. Moreover, the child who grew up in a family of love, no matter how unstable life was, would still be confident and compassionate—active, aggressive, and courageous. He would have all the strong points Danzhu had, and all the advantages she did not have [...].
>
> [...] The more Chuanqing thought, the more he felt that Danzhu was shallow and senseless. If he had such a good family, he would make the most of any opportunity to become a perfect person. In short, he did not like Yan Danzhu.
>
> As time went by, his hatred toward Danzhu, as well as his irrational infatuation with Yan Ziye, became stronger and stronger. (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 6,* 19- 20)

Disqualifying Danzhu from being the daughter of Yan Ziye, Chuanqing thus assumes her identity and becomes the child of the Yan family. The more his hatred and love toward Danzhu and Yan Ziye, respectively, grows, the more he is dominated by the signifier he forces upon Yan Ziye. The more he wants to replace Danzhu, the more he is deluded by the imaginary coherence between the signifier and the signified.

Chuanqing begins to feel pain when he recognizes the disjunction between fantasy and reality. Imagining that he is the signifier of an outstanding child from a healthy family, Chuanqing is, however, distressed when he realizes how much he resembles Nie Jiechen:

> He and his father, Nie Jiechen, had more contacts in daily life than they did before. He discovered that in many ways he did resemble his father. Not only his appearance and his figure, but even the way he walked and some of his habitual motions made him look like his father. He detested the Nie Jiechen who lived in his body. He had many ways to avoid his father, but he was inseparable from himself. (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 6,* 20)

The conflict between Chuanqing as the signifier of Yan Ziye's child and Chuanqing as the biological son of Nie Jiechen makes him more disappointed towards real life. Moreover, it brings Chuanqing's symbolic world to the verge of breaking down. As a result, he "lay prostrate on the bamboo case in the corner of his room all day long and indulged himself in daydreams" (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 6,* 20).

The last straw arrives when Chuanqing witnesses how Yan Ziye betrays the image of a father he depends on. Shortly before the final exam, Yan Ziye gives his students an oral quiz to see how well they have prepared for it. Hardly devoted to study, Chuanqing cannot answer the questions and becomes the target of other students' laughter. Outraged, Yan Ziye scolds him without reservation:

"Nie Chuanqing, I have kept an eye on you for a long time. You have been absent-minded since last term. Did you hear anything of what I was talking about in class? Did you keep notes?—If you do not like studying, no one will force you to do so. Just quit before it's too late. Do not waste your classmates' time and do not waste my time!"

Chuanqing found his manner was the same as that of his father. He could not help crying. He covered his face with both hands, but Yan Ziye still saw it. What Ziye detested most in his life was to see people crying. Even when women were crying, he would take their tears as the threatening weapon of the weak. As for men who were crying, he thought they were completely shameless. Thus, instigated by his fury, he shouted out, "Don't you feel ashamed? If all the Chinese youth were like you, China would already have been destroyed."

The sentence was like a hammer pounding Chuanqing's heart. He simply sat down and laid his face prone on the table, crying loudly. Ziye said, "If you want to cry, cry outside the classroom. I will not allow you to annoy other people. Our class is still going on!" Chuanqing could not stop crying once he had started. His sobbing voice became louder and louder. Moreover, he was a little bit deaf. He could not hear what Yan Ziye had just said. Ziye took a forward step, pointed at the door, and shouted, "Get out!" Chuanqing stood up, rushing and stumbling out of the classroom. (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 6,* 21-22)

For Chuanqing, "even if his father cursed him and called him 'Pig! Dog!', he did not care about it at all, because he looked down on his father. But even a slight reproach from Yan Ziye would hurt him deeply. Even until death, he would not forget it" (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 6,* 23). Chuanqing is forced to admit that Yan Ziye is not the respectable and reliable father he looked for. As the behavior of Yan Ziye does not correspond with the signifier Chuanqing identified him with, the symbolic world of Chuanqing collapses.

The night after the public humiliation in the classroom, Chuanqing comes across Danzhu on the mountain road. While Danzhu tries to comfort him for the insults he has suffered, Chuanqing becomes rather impatient and takes her consolation as her way of pitying and teasing him. Moreover, the frustration and depression he experienced in the class had aroused his envy. He is obsessed with the idea that he should be the child of Yan Ziye and it is Danzhu who is robbing him of his father. For Chuanqing, Yan Ziye is not only the signifier of a good father. He is actually the condensation of all his desires for himself to be a lively and healthy child and for a happy family based on the love between an affectionate mother and a dignified father. However, in reality, everything he craves for belongs to Danzhu. He cannot bear to face the disillusionment of his dreams. He becomes desperate with the intention of killing her:

> Chuanqing spoke as if the words were squeezed through the slit between his teeth, "Listen! I want you to die! If you exist, I will disappear. If I exist, you should disappear. Do you understand?"
>
> One of his arms gripped her shoulders tightly. The other arm pressed her head downwards violently, as if he wanted to push her head back towards

> the womb. She should not be born at all. He wanted her to go back. (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 6,* 28)

He keeps kicking her until she cannot respond anymore. Not knowing whether she is dead or not, Chuanqing rushes back home:

> It was freezing in this house. Even the white walls were frozen and turned out to be blue. There was no stove in Chuanqing's room. It was so cold in his room that when he drew a breath, his nose would ache. However, the window was not open. It had remained closed for a long time. The house reeked of the smell of dust and greasy hair.
>
> Chuanqing lay prone on the bed. He heard his father talking to his stepmother next door, "The boy has become rather undisciplined. Out partying and dancing. Never thinking of coming home until it is so late!" His stepmother replied, "It's about time to get him a wife."
>
> Tears flew down from Chuanqing's eyes. The corner of his mouth jerked for a moment, as if he tried to smile, but he could not move at all. It seemed his face and his body was frozen within an icy cover.
>
> Danzhu was not dead. In two days the school would begin and he would have to see her there. He could not run away. (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 6,* 29)

Chuanqing's counterattack fails. He can neither replace nor kill Danzhu. He is unable to change reality. When he is back home, the bleakness of his father's world still hovers around him. The freezing air in his room mirrors his frozen heart. The window, closed for a long time, withholds from him the opportunity to flee from the house. He can only live with the corrupt and rotten smells of the dust and greasy hair in his room.

Before Chuanqing loses control and gives Danzhu a violent beating, they stand at the shoulder of the mountain road, where Danzhu leans against the rail:

> The pale sky and sea formed a marble screen displayed behind Danzhu [...].
>
> [...] She turned her head away, with her back facing him. The wind grew wilder. Her cape became bloated, flying over her head and almost covering it. Under the cape was a white silk gown which sent out the color of gloomy green. With a swift glance, the floating cape was like a huge parachute. Her shining white body was like a pendant swinging under the parachute. Was she a parachutist from the moon? (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 6,* 26)

The paragraph reminds the scholar Shui Jing of the connection between Danzhu and the lady in the moon named Chang'e 嫦娥. As he remarks, the "marble screen" turns the thoughts of the readers to the poem "Chang'e" (To the Moon Goddess) by the Tang poet, Li Shangyin 李商隱. The poem begins with the following line: "Upon the marble screen the candle-light is winking" (trans. by Xu Yuan-zhong in *Three Hundred Tang Poems* 359). As far as Shui Jing is concerned, Zhang "compares Danzhu to the beautiful lady in the moon", while Chuanqing, "who looks upon Danzhu, becomes the toad in the moon. In other words, he is but an ignoble pest" (*Zhang Ailing Weiwan* 132). There is an unbridgeable gap between the fairy lady and the ugly toad. Whatever he does, Chuanqing will never belong to the celestial world of Danzhu, the world that he craves for, nor can he supplant her to be the child of Yan Ziye. The hierarchical difference between Chang'e and the toad marks the inevitable disjunction between his fantasy and the reality Chuanqing tries to ignore. Even before he tries to eliminate Danzhu, Zhang has implied that it is impossible for Chuanqing to bring into realization his dream of becoming Yan Ziye's child. The integrity of his symbolic world, based on the assumption that Yan Ziye corresponds to the signifier of an ideal father and Chuanqing matches the signifier of a lovely child, will remain intact only in his imagination.

### 4. The Symbolic World in "In the Years of Youth"

In this story, the protagonist, Pan Ruliang, is also caught in the polarity between two worlds, one of which signifies the life of Ruliang's family who are enmeshed in the spiral of spiritual stagnancy:

> Ruliang was a patriotic boy, but he did not give much favor towards Chinese people. The foreigners he came to know were either movie stars or good looking and elegant models from cigarette or soap advertisements. The Chinese he was acquainted with were his family. His father was not a villain. Since he was occupied by his business all day long and rarely stayed at home, Ruliang hardly met him. Thus, he was not averse to him. But, after dinner, his father always drank alone in the living room, with some fried peanuts. The wine made his face flush with a greasy shine, and then he looked like the boss of a small and shabby shop. He ran a soy sauce factory. Anyway, he was also a boss. However… as long as he was his father, he should be the distinguished one among others. (*Zhang Ailing*

> *Quanji 6,* 184-85)

The ambiguous feeling which Ruliang experiences about his father is engendered by the fact that, though he does not detest him, he does not respect him because he is not outstanding. Not ambitious in his career, his father is only contented with a humdrum and petty life. The greasy shine of his complexion echoes the "greasy spots" on the vest of Chuanqing's father. Greasiness becomes a symbol of a life which is too dirty and sticky to get rid of it. Ruliang's father stands for the squalid world that he wants to detach from. To reinforce this, Zhang pictures him adoring the foreigners who, showcasing their beauty in the movies or advertisements, are in sharp contrast to the mediocrity in Ruliang's *Chinese* family.

In addition, the image of the charming movie stars is associated with the beautiful but mysterious and distant mother Zhang describes in her essay. Again, the world outside China is designated the signifier of a noble and dignified life. However, Ruliang's mother is also part of the world that drives him away. His mother and sisters only make him disparage his family even more:

> As for his mother, she was an uneducated woman suffering from the repression of feudal morality. Her life was but a sacrifice [...]. When something distressed her, she did not cry. Instead, she found fault with her children and made them cry. When she was free, she would listen to Shaoxing opera or play mahjong. Rulaing had two elder sisters who were also college students. They loved wearing cosmetics. They were not pretty but did not resign themselves to their plain faces. Ruliang did not want women who were like his sisters. (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 6,* 185)

For Ruliang, the Shaoxing opera and mahjong characterize the vulgarity of the Chinese life. He disdains these types of entertainment because they expose the boorish nature of his mother. But when his sisters try to defend themselves from being ordinary by applying make-up, their efforts seem to him so futile and stupid, as if there is nothing they can do to change their mediocrity.

Ruliang espouses the romantic ideas which preach that only people who are deeply hurt by love or frustrated by failure in their careers are qualified to have a drink. When they drink, they will show an impressive painfulness that arouses others' sympathy:

> They held their head with one hand and stared blankly. One lock of hair hung down from their forehead and swept over their eyes. However, they did not wink at all. They kept staring. Their eyes looked empty. Their suffering thus became very persuasive and deserved compassion. Although drinking too much would do harm to people's heath, drinking could still be taken as the behavior most suited to that of the lower reaches of nobility.( *Zhang Ailing Quanji 6,* 185)

The image of the alcoholic is given a tragic luster in Ruliang's imagination, while in reality, his father looks parsimonious when he drinks:

> However, his father only poured a bit of wine timidly from the tin bottle into a teacup with a broken handle. While drinking, he was also chatting with his mother who sat beside him. He talked about one topic and she talked about another. They did not interact with each other. Sometimes, when they detected the gluttonous appearance on their children's faces,

> they would dole out some peanuts to them. (185)

His father, not charitable enough to drink a great deal, becomes such a miser that he only allows himself to take a few sips of wine from a broken cup. While Rulaing's parents ignore each other in conversations, his siblings do nothing but show their greed for food. Therefore, it is not surprising that "what Ruliang despised most were his brothers and sisters. They were dirty, lazy, irresponsible, and immature. They were the most childish children" (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 6,* 185). His discontent with people living under the same roof with him gives birth to a signifier of an ordinary Chinese family blemished by its gluttony and vulgarity.

It is worth noting how Ruliang evaluates the same behavior with a double standard, which is applied more severely to people living in China whose life defines banality. Drawing a distinct line between himself and his family and attributing himself to the superior western models appearing in advertisements, he feels disdain living with them. Thus, "he never spoke when he was at home. He was a lonely onlooker. He looked at them coldly. The overwhelming disdain made his eyes turn into the color of light blue. It was the color of stones, the color of the shadows cast by pedestrians walking on the morning frost" (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 6,* 186). The image of the morning frost reflects the coldness of the aloof and unconcerned attitude Ruliang holds toward his family. Like a pedestrian who just passes by, for his family, he is not flesh and blood, but only a shadow they leap over.

Ruliang is infatuated with coffee and medicine, the representatives of the superiority of western civilization, by which he can distinguish himself from the Chinese philistines:

> He had a religious belief in coffee, not because of its aroma, but because of

> the coffee pot, its complicated structure, its scientific silver color, and its glittering glass lid. It was due to the same reason he chose to be a student of medicine, largely because medical equipment looked brand new, shiny and bright. Taken out from the suitcase one after another, they were cold metal products, delicate and omnipotent. The grandest one was the electrotherapy machine. The intricate gears rotated diligently, striking the flying sparks which produced light, delight, and healthy sounds of jazz music. Modern science was the only thing impeccable in this dissatisfying world. When he became a doctor and put on the clean and sterilized white coat, the father drinking with fried peanuts, the mother listening to Shaoxing opera, and the tacky sisters, would all be kept away from him.
>
> This was the kind of future Ruliang expected. Now, Cynthia was included in his future. ( *Zhang Ailing Quanji 6,* 190)

The coffee pot and the medical equipment develop Ruliang's deep fascination with the scientific benefits that western civilization is noted for. The silvery coffee pot which carries the message of sanitary elegance completely outshines the slovenly greasiness of his father's broken cup. For the same reason, Ruliang adores the tidy medical instruments that deliver the message of sublime nobility, the feature his vulgar family lacks. The spotless white coat encloses Ruliang in a perfect world where the professional specialty of doctors is accorded deference, and ensures him against the dissatisfying world where his parents and sisters survive each stagnant day. His desires for the silvery coffee pot and shiny medical equipment are passed on to the Russian girl he is enamored with, Cynthia, the signifier of an ideal foreign woman who projects the best possibilities of life outside China.

Ruliang feels he has known Cynthia even before they meet, because her appearance resembles the profile of the face he is used to sketching in books:

> Pan Ruliang had a bad habit. When he undertook some studies, there was a pencil in his hand and, as if he was unwilling to leave his hand idle, he always drew small pictures of people in the books. He never had any training in painting. Nor was he interested in it. But as soon as the point of his pencil touched the paper, it would move zigzag on it, and then, subconsciously, he would finish a profile which always looked like the left side of the same face. He had been sketching since he was a child. It had become one of his instincts. He could not only do the job with his eyes closed, but also with his left hand. The only difference was that the right hand was defter, while the left hand was somewhat clumsy and the curve of the profile thus became sharper. As a result, the face looked thinner, as if the person had just survived a severe illness. He did not draw hair. Nor were there eyebrows or eyes. It was a simple line from the forehead to the jaw. But people could tell it was not the face of a Chinese, because the nose was pointed. (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 6,* 184)

The fact that the profile does not look Chinese, on the one hand, confirms that Ruliang assuages his repulsion of his Chinese fellows by a deluge of fantasies about non-Chinese. On the other, it foretells his encounter with Cynthia, the embodiment of the profile he has been familiar with since his childhood.

Cynthia, the typist working for the principal, is reading a newspaper in the lounge of the school where Ruliang attends. Ruliang recognizes her at first sight:

> When her face moved to the other side, all of a sudden, Ruliang was surprised. Her profile was exactly the same one he had been sketching since he was a child.
>
> No wonder that when he registered at school, he felt the Russian woman looked familiar to him [...]. Her yellow hair lost its blonde beauty. Maybe there should be some sunlight to endow it with the pure goldenness belonging to the picture of Saint Mary. (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 6,* 186)

The color of her hair is not as attractively blonde as that of the holy goddess, foreshadowing incompatibility between Cynthia in Ruliang's fantasy and Cynthia in reality. However, Ruliang is not aware of the difference yet, as he is totally overwhelmed by their unexpected encounter. He feels as if they have known each other for decades and their reunion cheers him:

> A strange sense of happiness emerged in his heart, as if she was created by his handicraft. She belonged to him. He could not tell whether he liked her or not, but she was one part of him. It seemed that the only thing he had to do was to go over and say, "Oh! It is you! You are mine, don't you know?" Then he could pick her head gently and put it between the pages of his book. (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 6,* 187)

Ruliang has already claimed Cynthia even before he talks to her. To meet Cynthia is to find the part of himself which he had lost long ago. His symbolic world will be consummated as long as Cynthia lives up to the elegance and magnificence of an ideal foreign woman.

They strike up a conversation when Cynthia notices the profiles on his book, which leads to her assuming that Ruliang has been in love with her for a long time and therefore kept sketching her. The possibility of love brings color to their faces. To develop their relationship, they promise to tutor each other in German and Chinese. The night before their first class, Ruliang soaks himself in the infatuation with Cynthia:

> Ruliang did not fall asleep until very late that night. Cynthia… she thought he had a crush on her. It was a misunderstanding... She thought he loved her, and she gave him such a chance to be acquainted with her [...].
>
> She was a capable girl. She worked in a foreign company in the daytime and also had a part-time job at a night school. She was just about the age of his sisters but she was not like them [...].
>
> Maybe he really loved her but he was unaware of it. She had already known it—people said that women were more sensitive than men. He felt strange about their encounter. He never believed in destiny, but this was really unusual. (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 6,* 188-89)

When compared with his sisters, Cynthia is obviously superior to them, the former being diligent and competent, while the latter waste their time on cosmetics. Not resorting to destiny which might bring them together, Ruliang, instead, credits Cynthia's sensitivity for perceiving their love. However, the inexplicit feeling that bewilders Ruliang results from his unawareness of the fact that he does not fall in love with Cynthia, but with the personification of the profile. She is merely the reflection of his desires for the foreigners in advertisements and for the scientific authority represented by the coffee pot and the medical equipment.

Ruliang arranges their first date. It is his first step into a world without Chinese. On the winter morning, he puts on his best suit and bicycles to Cynthia's:

> In Ruliang's belly was the very hot breakfast. In Ruliang's heart was overwhelming happiness. It happened quite often that he would feel happy for unknown reasons. But, today, he thought, it must be because of Cynthia.
>
> The dogs in the wilderness barked. The bell in the school rang. Strings of golden tinkling bells hung from the cloudless sky. Cynthia had curly yellow hair. Each curl of her hair was like a bell. Lovely Cynthia. (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 6,* 189)

The parallel between the "very hot breakfast" and the "overwhelming happiness" communicates the physical warmth with the spiritual one that Ruliang experiences. The sounds of barks and bells prelude his first date with a beautiful foreign woman. The cloudless sky forecasts the sunny day in Ruliang's heart. The golden color of the strings is connected to the acoustic image of tinkling bells which is then transformed into the visual one of Cynthia's "curly yellow hair." On his way to Cynthia, the world around Ruliang becomes eminently satisfying. Just as how he once poeticized the behavior of drinking, Ruliang garnishes his first date with fairy fantasies in which his happiness, the fair weather and the pleasant sounds of dogs and bells are all awarded by Cynthia.

In order to impress her with his dress, Ruliang decides to return home to get a brand new wool scarf which will better match his suit:

> On his way back home, he passed a magnificent house recently built on a desolate area. He couldn't imagine that the music of Shaoxing opera also came out from the radio in this house. It filtered through the rouge red laced curtain. The singer was singing the play "Eighteen Drawers." Her voice was clear and emotionless… It was the doom of civilization! Even the hostess living in such a graceful environment could be like his mother. Ruliang did not want women like his mother. At least, Cynthia belonged to another world. Ruliang affiliated her with anything lovely and welcome, such as scholarships, football games, German bicycles, and the new literature. (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 6,* 190)

Taking Cynthia as the signifier of an ideal foreigner, Ruliang cannot separate her from the accomplishments of the western culture he longs for. She is associated with the best parts of life he can think of in a foreign country, the financial support, exciting sports, the company that ensures customers the quality of its products and the form of art that displays the spiritual advances of human beings. All the promises of the lovely world of Cynthia are, however, threatened by the music of Shaoxing opera, which will terminate human civilization. Ruliang equates the world behind the laced curtain with his family, where the decadent music of Shaoxing operas creeps all over. He strives to stride over the gap between Cynthia and his family, leaving his family behind and heading toward Cynthia. Nevertheless, the incompatibility between the sublime building and the vulgar hostess has foreboded the disillusionment Ruliang has to go through when the uncouth behavior of Cynthia soon annoys him.

Out of surging eagerness and excitement, Riliang arrives early for their date.

However, when he enters her office, his passions wane. His first sight triggers the collapse of his symbolic world:

> He paused for a while—she seemed to be a little bit different from the person in his memory. As a matter of fact, he came to know her yesterday, and she should not already be in his memory. It was a short time since he knew her, but he had spent a long time missing her—he thought too much, and his thought became unrealistic. Now he saw a girl of no amazing beauty. Her hair was yellow, but not uniformly. One layer was dark yellow, the other was light yellow, and the one close to the scalp was the greasy color of chestnut. Maybe she had just finished a simple lunch. When she saw him, she rubbed a paper bag into a ball and threw it to a wastebasket. While she was talking to him, she was also worried whether there were still crumbs on her lips. She kept wiping the corner of her mouth carefully, but was also afraid she would smear her lipstick. Her legs were hidden under the desk. She only wore a pair of flesh-colored stockings. She took off her high heels, for the sake of comfort. Ruliang sat opposite to her. He would either kick her shoes or her legs, as if she was born with many legs.
>
> He was annoyed, but he at once blamed himself. Why did he feel dissatisfied with her? Because she took off her shoes in public? She had to sit at the desk for the whole day, and her legs must become numb. No wonder she needed some slovenly time. She was only flesh and blood. She was not the abstract and illusionary dream he dreamed of. (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 6,* 191)

Cynthia's defects make Ruliang realize she is far from the perfect foreign woman he thirsts for. Not impressively beautiful, she is as plain as his sisters. Moreover, the color of her hair has a yellow tint of greasiness which connects Cynthia to Ruliang's father, whose face will "flush with a greasy shine" when he drinks. The dirty and revolting world of greasiness Ruliang's family signifies overlaps with the orderly and tidy world Cynthia signifies and the gap between them is thus bridged. Throwing away the paper bag carelessly and laying her feet bare in public, Cynthia does not act in accordance with the demure grace that, as far as Ruliang's fantasy is concerned, is inherent in a foreigner's nature. He feels uneasy when sitting opposite to her, as he does not know how to avoid kicking her legs, which is, however, their first physical contact. To prevent his symbolic world from disintegrating, Ruliang tries to explain away Cynthia's bad manners. However, he can not deny that she is only a human being. She is not the flawless personification of the profile he had created.

Though their first date is a disappointment, their relationship continues. But the more Ruliang knows about Cynthia, the more he is disillusioned:

> Now Ruliang understood Cynthia more. But he did not want to understand her, because once he knew what kind of person she was, he could not dream about her anymore.
>
> One time, he brought her a box of snacks. She opened a book and used it as a plate. Pieces of crumbled sugar and walnuts scattered all over the page, but she cared nothing about the mess and just closed the book. He did not like her slovenliness. But he tried his best to ignore it. He would rather notice and memorize the more poetic part of her. He knew he did not love Cynthia. He fell in love for the sake of love. (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 6,* 193)

Cynthia is no longer the lovely girl with curly hair who will bring into Ruliang's life the pleasant weather and the dulcet barks of dogs and the tinkling sounds of bells. Step by step, she drifts away from the signifier imposed upon her, and unveils the sloppiness which looms large to him but is imperceptible to her. Cynthia is on a par with Ruliang's family in terms of her mediocre appearance, her unrefined manners, and her sordid lifestyle. Nevertheless, Ruliang indulges himself in the unrealistic part of her. If his symbolic world is about to fall apart, at least he can console himself with the lingering romance of his fantasy about her. However, he confesses to himself the harrowing truth about his love. He does not love Cynthia, but the signifier he places upon her, because to be in love with a foreign woman allows him to embark on the fulfillment of his desires for an elite life outside China.

Before he proposes to Cynthia, Ruliang is informed of the news of her wedding. Petrified and remaining speechless for a moment, Ruliang still decides to attend the wedding and get himself drunk. However, he can not have guessed that there would be no wine at the ceremony. What he witnesses is the most relentless display of the disillusionment of a romantic wedding:

> There were only a few people in the church, but the whole place reeked of rain shoes. A priest put on a cloak that looked like a golden stained carpet. His hair touched his shoulders. It flowed and almost merged with his golden beard. He could not stop sweating. Drops of sweat were dripping from the roots of his hair and beard. He was a tall and good-looking Russian. But as he could not quit drinking, his face blushed and swelled. He was an alcoholic, spoiled by women. He was so sleepy that he could hardly open his eyes.

> The leader of the chorus who stood beside the priest resembled him in his face and dress. But he was smaller. His voice, however, was loud. He sang and danced with excitement. He pulled his neck straight, the sweat flowing down along it. It was so hot that he had lost all his hair.
>
> A wedding assistant came out quietly from the back of the altar. His hands held a salver. He was a suntanned Chinese with a pockmarked face. Under the dark robe that the monks were often dressed in was a pair of white cloth slacks. On his bare feet was a pair of slippers. He also had long hair, dark and greasy. It hung over his cheeks and made him look like a ghost. He was not the ghost from the book of Chinese strange stories, *Liao Zhai* 聊齋. He was the ghost appearing around the public burial-mounds where the termites crawled in and out. (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 6,* 197-98)

The world around Cynthia is no longer the bright reflection of her loveliness. Her wedding is like a funeral which transforms the church into a gloomy tomb shrouded by the smell of damp, dirt and sweat. The glamour of the wedding is further devastated by the nonchalant and careless attitudes of the attendants. The priest and the chorus leader are foreigners without the elegance which ennobled the movie stars and the models in the advertisements. Moreover, their terrible perspiration fills the church with a sour and foul smell, totally contrary to the clean and sanitary atmosphere belonging to the silvery coffee pot and the medical equipment which had inspired Ruliang's fantasy about the West. The Chinese assistant has long, dirty and greasy hair which covers his disgusting pockmarked face. His appearance functions as a counterpart to the squalor of the priest and the chorus leader. Cynthia is helpless to measure up to her identity as the signifier of the ideal foreign woman. In fact, she is swamped in the same sordidness as that which Ruliang's family signifies. The distinction between the foreigners and the Chinese disappears. Her wedding serves to be an apocalypse that foretells the impending collapse of Ruliang's symbolic world.

Shortly after her wedding, Cynthia, in financial straits, asks Ruliang to find some part-time jobs for her. But then she falls ill and just barely survives typhoid fever. When Ruliang comes to visit her, she lies in bed, half-conscious:

> Her jaw and neck were thin to the extreme. They were like the pit of a candied date drained of juice. The pit was only clothed with a thin skin of pulp. But he could still recognize her profile. It did not change a lot. It was the same line from the corner of the forehead to the jaw, the line that Ruliang could draw by instinct.
>
> From then on, Ruliang never sketched in his books. Now, they were very clean all the time. (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 6,* 199)

The final passage of the story reminds us of the beginning where the profile drawn by Ruliang's left hand is described as looking like a person who has "just survived a severe illness" (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 6,* 184).Therefore, the story starts with an implicit foreshadowing of the disillusionment Ruliang will suffer when his dream for the foreign world that once enriched his life like a juicy fruit, has shrunk into a pit. The image of the emaciated Cynthia is an epiphany which discloses to Ruliang the plain truth that she does not correspond to the signifier he had imposed upon her. She cannot fulfill his desire for the happy life that western civilization can provide. Her life in China is as dreary as that of Ruliang's family. The incompatibility between the signifier and the signified destroys the integrity of Ruliang's symbolic world. Therefore, the disjunction between fantasy and reality deprives Ruliang of the instinctive skill of sketching. Since then, he stops dreaming as he realizes it is impossible to redeem his disappointment towards real life through fantasies.

### 5. The Symbolic World in "Red Rose and White Rose"

The story begins with two kinds of roses that, in a figurative sense, envision Tong Zhenbao's desires. "There were two women in Zhenbao's life. He took one as his white rose, and the other as his red rose. One was the virtuous wife, and the other was the passionate mistress" (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 6,* 52). The contrast between the white and the red roses identifies Zhenbo's lust for two kinds of women, which weave together the pattern of his life:

> Maybe every man has encountered two kinds of women like this, at least two of them. If he married the red rose, as time went by, she would turn into a spot of blood left by a dead mosquito on the wall. But the white rose remained as crystal as the moonlight shining at his bedside. If he married the white rose, she would turn into a grain of dry rice stuck to his clothes. The red rose was still like a vermilion mole right on the center of his chest. But the logic did not work for Zhenbao. He was orderly and well-organized. He would carry out a task from start to finish. He was, completely, the most idealized figure in the history of modern China. Even if he was confronted with something disturbing, as long as he consulted with himself and then spent some time dealing with it, the solution he came up with would seem to be perfect. In his world, everything should have its own place. (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 6,* 52)

There is a conflict lurking in this paragraph. On the one hand, Zhenbao is a self-disciplined person, convinced that he has total command of everything in his life. Therefore, the signifiers of the red rose and the white rose mark his fantasies for two different kinds of women. The symbolic order in his life lays the foundation for the assumption that everything is supposed to fall into place, which implies that his wife and mistress should fit in with the signifiers he imposes upon them. As Edward Gunn points out, "The title 'Red Rose and White Rose' alludes to the contrastive categories he designates for the women he courts or uses, the one group defined as illicit and the other as socially recognizable. But such an order, based on his will, is no match for his desires or those of the women he meets" (309). However, on the other hand, it is apparently at variance with Zhenbao's values when the narrator claims that the red rose that defines a voluptuous mistress would become as annoying as "a spot of blood" on the wall and that the white rose that signifies a chaste wife would grow as dull as "a grain of dry rice" on his clothes. The rupture between the signifier and the signified insinuated in the initial part of the paragraph launches a preemptive strike against the stability of the symbolic order in Zhenbao's life and foretells the collapse of his symbolic world.

The first time his symbolic order is in jeopardy of breaking down is when Zhenbao has his first sexual experience with a prostitute in Paris and feels upset when seeing her in the mirror:

> Her abundant, disheveled blond hair, stretched taut in the dress, revealed a thin face. Her eyes were blue, yes, but for a moment these spots of blue sank into the green make-up under her eyes, and the eyeballs themselves turned into transparent glass balls. It was a severe, cold and masculine face,

> the face of a warrior from distant ages. Chen-pao's [Zhenbao] nerves were jolted. (trans. by Edward Gunn, in Gunn 310)

He can barely recognize the prostitute in the mirror. When her face turns into that of a male warrior with awesome nonchalance, she has unshackled herself from the signifier with which Zhenbao labels her a base whore with "the smell of cheap perfume, foxy odor and sour sweat" (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 5,* 55). Moreover, if Zhenbao is disheartened by the transformation of her sex, her blue eyes and green make-up which contributes to a gloomy and ghastly air even aggravates his uneasiness. Leaving the hotel, he feels that everything has gone wrong, "wrong to the point of horrors" (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 6,* 55). His mastery of his life is challenged by a prostitute, as he realizes that "such a woman, even a woman like this, he was unable to master her, though he had paid her" (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 6,* 55). Gunn claims that "the fundamental point of the passage is Chen-pao's [Zhenbao] sensation of losing control, of being threatened and dominated" (310). Therefore, bearing in mind the mortification of his first sexual encounter, Zhenbao decides to tighten the control over his life. "From then on, Zhenbao was resolved to create a 'correct' world, and bring it with him all the time. Within that tiny world, he was the only and absolute master" (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 5,* 55). His insistence on being the master reflects his emphasis on the correspondence between the signifier and the signified. However, the Parisian prostitute not only functions to remind him of the fright of a life beyond his control but she also foreshadows "the more evident assertions of a woman that [...] has transcended Chen-pao's order" (Gunn 310).

When studying in England for several years, Zhenbao enters into a relationship with a Eurasian girl named Rose. "It was his first love. Because of her, Zhenbao compared the two women he met later on to roses" (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 5,* 56).

Rose becomes a formulary signifier with which Zhenbao defines his desires for women. When he returns to China and moves into his friend's flat, he is instantly attracted to his friend's wife, Wang Jiaorui, "formerly an overseas student in England with a reputation for loose morals" (Gunn 311). Her physical lure and arbitrary character tally with the quality of a red rose— a mistress with whom men can enjoy the fun of philandering without any sense of guilt. Zhenbao "soothes himself that she is the kind of woman for whom he need have no sense of responsibility. Having determined this, he feels free to decide, and desire overtakes him" (Gunn 311). The first time he meets with Jiaorui, she has not finished shampooing her hair. When they shake hands, "some of the soap bubbles fell on Zhenbao's hands. He was unwilling to wipe them off, but rather let them dry naturally. His skin contracted slightly, as if there was a pair of lips sucking it tenderly… Zhenbao was disquieted. He always felt there was a small mouth sucking his hand" (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 5,* 59). The charm of red rose is so irresistible that even the soap bubbles falling from her shampoo-covered hair can bewitch Zhenbao. The basic decorum of shaking hands has already aroused his sexual fantasies about her. From then on, Zhenbao indulges himself in flirting with Jiaorui.

Zhang takes one's attire as a tactic for self-expression, reflecting the personality of a person. In her essay "From the Mouths of Babes," she claims that "for people who are unable to speak, clothes are a kind of language, a 'pocket drama' they can carry wherever they go" (*Written on Water* 8). In this story, according to Shui Jing, Zhang designs dresses for Jiaorui to signal her identity as the red rose (*Zhang Ailing Weiwan* 47-50). In the well-wrought passages which elaborate on the patterns and fabric of the clothes, the signifier of Jiaorui as a coquettish mistress is brought to life. The first suit of clothes for the red rose is the bathrobe Jiaorui wears at her first encounter with Zhenbao. Wrapped in her bathrobe and with shampoo bubbles in her hair, she has already caught his eye with her corporal seductiveness:

> It was better to see her in person than only to hear gossip about her. Under her hair colored white by the bubbles of shampoo was her golden brown face. The muscles of her face strained tight and made her skin look glossy. It was so tight that her eyes curved up at the corner, like those of the Chinese opera actresses. She wore a striped bathrobe without a belt fastened around the waist. The robe was loose and people could imagine her figure by looking at the light black stripes on it. Each stripe moved as if it was alive. People always said that dresses with huge and slack sleeves could not show the beauty of a woman's body. Now Zhenbao realized that comment was not entirely persuasive. He turned on the faucet. The water was not hot, but the boiler downstairs should be operating. It seemed there was a burning lamp wick in the lukewarm water. The water was flowing down zigzag from the faucet. Every inch of it was alive. Zhenbao did not know where his thoughts were going. (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 5,* 59)

The water from the faucet is flowing across Zhenbao's heart, irrigating and invigorating all his sensory organs. The physical lure of Jiaorui is so strong that, by only looking at the bathrobe floating over her body, Zhenbao has stitched his sexual fantasies about this woman.

However, intimidated by the harm an affair with his friend's wife would cause, Zhenbao struggles to defend himself against the seduction of the red rose in order to protect his reputation:

> Standing by the door with towels in his hands, Zhenbao looked at the hair

> under the strong light of the bathroom, scattering disorderly all over the floor. He was worried. He liked passionate women, women with loose morals and unsuitable for marriage. Here was a woman who was already married and was the wife of his friend… maybe there was no danger… but look at her hair! It was scattered everywhere… She was present everywhere, lingering around and attaching to you! (60)

The hair has imposed upon Zhenbao the sensuous tantalization of Jiaorui's body. Though warning himself that she will not be an ideal wife, he cannot avoid being attracted to such a woman. Thus, Zhenbao decides to enjoy the flirtation without any serious concern about their relationship.

Soon after Zhenbao moves in, his friend, Wang Shihong 王士洪, goes to Singapore for business. He is left alone to develop and nourish his desires for a licentious woman who poses no danger of marital duties. The day after Shihong leaves, Zhenbao runs into Jiaorui when she answers a phone call in the hallway, where her second piece of attire appears:

> She wore a long robe, the lower part of which trailed along the floor. Her robe was composed of the most stimulating and moist green. It was so green that it would color green whatever it touched. She moved a little bit, and there seemed to be a green patch left in the space where she had been a moment ago. The robe looked too small for her. It was slit on both sides about one and half inches. A green ribbon was sown across the slit, where the hot pink petticoat inside her robe was exposed. The hue of the dress was so harsh to the eyes that were people to stare at it for a long time they would suffer from color blindness. Only Jiaorui could wear clothes like

> these without uneasiness. (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 5,* 65)

The powerful and outspreading green of her robe speaks for the aggressive enticement of Jiaorui. She will impress her lure on anyone she tries to bait. Her tight robe, on the one hand, shapes the curve of her figure, and on the other, gives the slits where her "hot pink petticoat," relishing of an inviting sweetness, is partly visible. The unpleasant alignment of the green robe and the pink petticoat that breaks the law of harmony is arresting, but it also hints at the undisciplined passions of the red rose who usually ignores social conventions.

The third set of attire comes on the stage at one night, when Zhenbao rushes out of his room to answer a phone call to find Jiaorui is already there looking for the receiver:

> He took a look at Wang Jiaorui under the light and his eyes were fixed upon her. He had no idea whether she had just finished showering. She put on a sarong night-robe usually worn by Chinese living in South Asia. The flower print on the robe was so concentrated that it formed a black cloud in which people could not tell whether there were pictures of dragons and snakes, or of weeds and woods. Plenty of threads and vines lingered and crept around the cloud. The color of orange green burst out from the dark gold cloud. Her dress which served as a foil made the night in the room become even dimmer. The hallway under the dim yellow light looked like a train, traveling from one strange land to another. On the train, a passenger met a woman by chance. They were like two patches of drifting duckweeds that happened to see each other. But she was a kind and warm woman.

> She held the receiver with one of her hands. The other one reached downwards to button the small peach-pit golden buttons. She tried for a while but still failed. Actually people could see nothing through her unbuttoned robe, but Zhenbao's heart still dangled in the air. He was captivated by her tenderness. (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 5,* 69)

The tranquility of night is entirely encroached upon by the dazzling dress of Jiaorui. The gorgeous congregation of dark gold and orange green on the robe produces a dim hue of lively disorder, which not only interacts with the mysterious and alluring atmosphere in the night, but also reinforces the thrilling and enchanting character of the red rose. Motivated by an intoxicating woman in a quiet and deep night, Zhenbao thus embarks on his fantasies about her. For him, Jiaorui is like a strange woman he meets on a train. Although he knows little about her, still he feels close to her. As she stretches her arm in an attempt to button her clothes, the even stronger attempt is to seduce men with her invisible body hiding behind the golden buttons. Zhenbao completely surrenders to her allure, and allows his passion to overwhelm him.

The fourth suit emerges in the scene when Jiaorui goes to a dinner with Zhenbao. "She wore a dark purple and blue georgette gown. A golden heart-shaped necklace loomed around her breasts, as if she had no other heart except for this golden one" (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 5,* 77). The deep color of the gown sets off the shining necklace which channels men's line of sight to her breasts, representative of feminine attraction. With the successive display of glaring dresses, Zhang presents a vivid image of a red rose. The four different sets of attire finally climax at the scene after they have sex. The figurative sense of Jiaorui's fingernails incarnates the signifier of the red rose:

> The bedding in Jiaorui's room was too dainty. Zhenbao could not get used to it. He still felt dizzy when he woke up the next morning. As he combed his hair, he found a piece of fingernail. It was a tiny red crescent. He was scratched by her long fingernails. Yesterday when he was about to fall asleep, he saw her sitting at the head of the bed and cutting her fingernails. He forgot to see whether there was a moon last night. It should have been a red crescent. (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 5,* 72)

The flamboyant redness of Jiaorui pervades the whole passage and knits together the images of the fingernails, the crescent and the blood oozing out of the scratch. The physical features of Jiaorui echo and finally merge with nature, making more eminent the impressiveness of the red rose. Even the aloof and impersonal moon is engulfed in the flames of her redness. The scholar Fei Yong comments that:

> this passage actually demonstrates the 'redness' of the red rose: red fingernails, red blood, and the red crescent. Three images of her body, her color and the scene outside her room overlap one another. The impact of sex results in violence, hurt, emptiness, and fatigue and all these feelings are inlayed within an overlapped space. (237)

With the interaction between the red fingernail and a red crescent, Zhang provides the most implicit but sensuous performance of sex in this story. Moreover, Jiaorui as the signifier of a passionate and coquettish mistress which is constructed by the deployment of four different sets of clothes is ultimately granted her fulsome life here.

The adulterous relationship does entertain Zhenbao for a while. Everyday when he comes off work, he takes a bus home:

> He sat on the upper deck of the bus, the head of it greeting the sunset and the glass of it fully covered with the sunlight. The bus roared toward the sunset, toward his happiness, his shameless happiness—it was definitely shameless. This was his woman, financially dependent on another man, living in another man's house and entitled with another man's family name. But Zhenbao felt even happier, because he knew he should not be happy about the affair. (72)

Zhenbao feels excited at the shamelessness, since there is no ethical concern in his affair with a mistress. However, Jiaorui fails to match his expectation for an ideal mistress who should hold a playful and cynical attitude toward love. On the contrary, she falls in love with him, and takes into serious consideration the possibility of divorce. Her intention of sacrificing her marriage for her genuine love exculpates Jiaorui from the signifier of the red rose.

Once again, Zhenbao experiences the horror that results from the disjunction between the signifier and the signified and the conceivable breakdown of his symbolic order. He is afraid his reputation and the prospects of his life will be ruined:

> She sent an airmail letter to Shihong and told him everything, asking him to set her free. Zhenbao uttered a sound of "ga" and rushed out instantly. He stopped by the streets and turned his head, looking at the magnificent apartment. It was a huge grey house with a streamline shape. It was like an unimaginably huge train, roaring directly at him. It clouded all the lights in his life. Everything was totally out of control. (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 5,* 80)

The symbol of the train on which Zhenbao ever broods over his encounter with a kind and warm woman is transformed into an imposing vehicle, almost running him over. The psychological breakdown then incurs the physical collapse. Zhenbao goes to a restaurant to alleviate his anxiety with wine, but then feels a wrenching stomachache. "No sooner had he lost self-control than he could hardly bear any minor pain" (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 5,* 80).

Zhenbao is hospitalized for a while. He "actually falls sick over this impending threat to his respectable position and is finally able to get rid of Chiao-jui [Jiaorui]." Then he "attempts to restore his sense of order by marrying a bland, frigid girl just finishing college" (Gunn 312). Accordingly, Meng Yanli as the signifier of the white rose functions to repair and strengthen his symbolic order damaged twice by the Parisian prostitute and the red rose. Zhenbao marries her simply because he supposes her to be a virtuous wife who will not commit adultery like a " 'red' apricot blossom creeping over the wall" (*hongxing chuqiang* 紅杏出牆). However, the bitterest irony in this story lies in that, as Zhang embodies the passion of the red rose in terms of her clothes, Yanli demythologizes the chastity of the white rose by means of her affair with a tailor, an expert in making clothes. The first time they meet, Zhenbao is deluded by her "vague whiteness" (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 5,* 83) which is usually connected to the purity and virtue of women. But he does not realize that she is a frigid woman and his marriage becomes even worse when Yanli is in conflict with her mother-in-law, who cannot bear the quarrels and thus refuses to live with Zhenbao anymore. "Zhenbao was in great disappointment because of his wife. He married her only because she was submissive. But he felt he was defrauded" (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 5,* 85). Yanli never lives out Zhenbao's expectation of an ideal wife. He is frustrated both by her indifference to sexual pleasures and the conflicts in the household she touches off. Finally, her affair with the tailor disqualifies her from the signifier of the white rose.

One day, Zhenbao goes home during work to fetch a raincoat. For unknown reasons, he is annoyed to see both Yanli and the tailor together in the living room:

> Yanli asked, "Are you going to have lunch at home?" Zhenbao replied, "No. I am back just to grab a raincoat." He took a look at the tailor's pack on the chair. The pack was not wet at all, but it had been raining for more than one hour. The tailor did not wear rain shoes either. The tailor seemed to be shocked by his glance. He walked to the pack and took out a measuring-tape to measure Yanli. Yanli made a vague gesture to Zhenbao and said, "The raincoat is drying in the hallway beside the kitchen." She seemed to be intent on brushing off the tailor and getting the raincoat for Zhenbao. But she remained motionless after all, standing still there for the measurement.
>
> Zhenbao knew quite well how the facial expression would change when you touched a woman after you had slept with her. It was more than evident. Zhenbao looked at them with a cold detachment. The rain was a pair of big and pale lips, sticking tightly to the window and huffing. Outside the house was a world full of chill and bewilderment. Everyone was locked closely in the house. People would feel especially friendly to see that there were three people like this in the room.
>
> Zhenbao stayed aloof, looking down at the inexperienced adulterer and adulteress. (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 5,* 92)

In this passage, the chastity of the white rose is defamed in an implicit way. As Fei Yong notices, "such a vague gesture discloses all her repressed sexual desires and the timid, nervous psychology. It stimulates rich imaginations for the relationship between Yanli and the tailor. However, the air in the room is totally humid and indecent. It is completely disconnected from purity" (238). The petals of the white rose flake off during her adultery with the tailor. Zhenbao, realizing that both Jiaorui and Yanli do not live up to the signifiers he forces upon them, actually suffers from a dual disillusionment. His wife and his mistress simply interchange the signifiers he designates for them. It is the virtuous wife, rather than the voluptuous mistress, who is in reality unfaithful to him.

The metaphor of the big and pale lips adhering to the window recaptures that of the soap bubbles falling from Jiaorui's hair, which is "like a pair of lips" sucking Zhenbao's hand softly. The lips that ever trigger his sexual fantasies about his mistress now function to reveal to him the disgrace of his wife. As Shui Jing points out, the lips imply that Yanli harbors the same desires as Zhenbao. He cannot ignore her passion by imprisoning her within the chastity of the white rose:

> Desires always sprout by accident, as if one accidentally splashes a small pile of soap bubbles on another person. The bubbles are like a small mouth, sucking tenderly. However, when Zhenbao's family, including the white rose, are all entrapped by their desires, the small bubble mouth transforms into a pair of big and pale lips. Soon it will devour everyone. Until then, could Zhenbao, as such a clever man, realize that it is too late for regret? (*Zhang Ailing Weiwan* 52)

Shui Jing does not explain what Zhenbao should feel regret for, but the criticism suggests that he will be destroyed by desires. The story which begins with how Zhenbao shapes his desires for women in terms of the signifiers of the red and white roses, however, confronts him with the successive disjunctions between the signifier and the signified in his relationships with the Parisian prostitute, Jiaorui and Yanli when everything in his life spins out of control. Zhenbao is ever confident in claiming that "he was his own master" (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 5,* 58). But he does not understand that he is unable to master his desires and the desires of other people. As he transfers his desires to signifiers and imposes them upon others, he is actually the one enslaved by these signifiers, destined to suffer from the collapse of his symbolic order.

Zhenbao wears a helpless but violent mask in reacting to the disorder of his symbolic world. After he breaks up with Jiaorui, she divorces Wang Shihong and remarries. When they meet again on the bus, the coquettish red rose has become a haggard middle-aged woman:

> Chen-pao [Zhenbao] said, "Do you love that man named Chu?" Chiao-jui [Jiaorui] nodded. When she answered him, though, she paused every couple of words: "It was from you that I learned how to love, earnestly...love after all is good. Even though we may suffer, afterwards we still want to love, so..." Chen-pao rolled up the square collar flap that hung down the back of her son's sailor suit and said softly, "You're very happy." Chiao-jui chuckled and said, "I'm just moving on forward. Whatever I run into I take as it comes." Chen-pao smiled coldly, "All you've run into are men." Chiao-jui didn't become angry. She tipped her head to one side thoughtfully and said, "Yes, when I was young, when I

> was good looking, no matter what I got into socially, it was always men I ran into. But since then, there have been other things besides men, after all—finally, something else…"
>
> Chen-pao was looking at her, unaware at the moment that the sensation he felt was unbearable envy. Chiao-jui said, "And you? How are you?" Chen-pao wanted to wrap up his fulsome, successful life into a couple of simple sentences. Just as he was framing these words, he raised his head and saw his face in the small mirror that protruded to the right of the operator's seat. It was quite calm. But since the bus jolted, the face in the mirror trembled unsteadily with it. It was a very odd sort of calm tremor, as though someone had massaged his face lightly. Suddenly his face actually began to tremble. In the mirror he saw his tears streaming down. Why, he didn't know himself. In such an encounter as this, if someone had to cry it should be she. This was all wrong, and yet astonishingly he could not restrain himself. (trans. by Edward Gunn, in Gunn 313)

Zhenbao comes across an aging red rose, the redness of which has faded away. However, the fact that he abandons her for his reputation does not shatter her faith in love. On the contrary, the relationship with Zhenbao makes Jiaorui a more sincere and courageous woman in love. Challenged by the cynical query from Zhenbao, she confesses that once she was in love with him. Her confession is so genuine that Shui Jing compares it to *dujuan tixie* 杜鵑啼血 (a cuckoo cries until its throat bleeds, usually meaning the crying is so sad that it moves anyone who hears it) ( *Zhang Ailing Weiwan* 46). The blood tinges the red rose with peerless nobility. To believe in love glorifies Jiaorui with the luster of chastity. In fact, she is the white rose Zhenbao is looking for, a wife who will be faithful to him. Zhenbao does not triumph in their reunion. Instead, he falls in a helpless confusion as his symbolic world is in turmoil. "Just as the Parisian prostitute's sex appeared reversed in the mirror in the hotel, Chiao-jui's reversal of roles threatens Chen-pao's order" (Gunn 314). When Jiaorui unshackles the identity of the passionate mistress, Zhenbao is still enslaved by it. His tears witness his disillusion as he realizes that Jiaorui was never the signifier of the red rose.

Zhenbao's tears soon transform into anger when he deals with the betrayal of the white rose:

> Zhenbao heard Yanli coming into the room. No sooner had she stepped in than he swept the desk light and the thermos bottle from the nightstand to the floor. Both of them shattered into pieces. He bent down to grab the light's iron pedestal, and threw it and its connecting wire at her. She turned about quickly and fled from the room. Zhenbao felt she was totally defeated. He gloated over it wholeheartedly. He stood there with a soundless laugh. The quiet laugh streamed out of his eyes, like tears flowing all over his face. (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 5,* 97)

Violence reflects Zhenbao's resentment at the unfulfilled desires he projects on his mistress and his wife. He heaves the furnishings toward Yanli to drive away his disillusionment of the white rose. Even though Yanli flees, he is the one actually defeated. However, he can only express his despair through laughing. The parallel between the contrastive emotions of tears and laughs lays bare Zhenbao's psychological breakdown.

The story is offered an ending which is less miserable, when a maid tells

Zhenbao the tailor has not been here for that long:

> Zhenbao murmurs in his heart, "Oh? Did they break up so easily? There was nothing affectionate in their relationship—how dirty they were!" He asked again, "How come? Did he not come for the payment at the Dragon Boat Festival?" The maid Yu replied, "His disciple came instead." Maid Yu had been working here for three years. She folded a small pair of slacks, put it on the bedside, and patted it softly. Although she did not look at him, she wore a warm and aged smile on her face which suggested consolation. Zhenbao was irritated. (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 5,* 96)

The maid tries to soothe Zhenbao's pain through her smile that, on the contrary, offends him. In the passage, according to Shui Jing, the focus is on the pair of slacks (*Zhang Ailing Weiwan* 50-51), which announces the end of the adultery. Moreover, it reminds us of the function of clothes that is consistent and repetitive throughout this story. While the image of the red rose is built on the exhibition of clothes, the desires of the white rose also blossom and wither in company with the implications produced by clothes.

One night, Zhenbao, disturbed by mosquitoes, is awakened and turns on the light in his bedroom:

> Near the center of the floor lay a pair of Yanli's embroidered slippers, the toes nearly touching, one a little to the front, the other a little to the rear, like a timid ghost, not daring to materialize, but approaching and entreating. Zhenbao sat at the bedside, staring at the slippers for a long time. When he lay on the bed again, he sighed. He felt the kind and gentle

> air that belonged to bygone days sneaking towards him step by step, and finally encircling him. Numberless worries and duties flew with numberless mosquitoes, buzzing around, biting him and sucking his blood.
>
> The next morning when he got up, he turned over a new leaf and became a good man again. (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 5,* 97)

The failed adultery reinstates Yanli in the signifier of the white rose. However, once blemished by the affair, she is no longer "as crystal as the moonlight." She is "subdued under his new order" and "reduced to a pair of slippers in a ghostlike presence before he is ready to face her again as part of his ordered world" (Gunn 314, 315). Still, Yanli does not fulfill his desires for the virtuous wife. "Chen-pao's desire to turn a blind eye (to the slippers) is itself a hopeless trap of unfulfillment" (Gunn 315). But, no matter how degraded Yanli is, it is better to harbor an imperfect image of the white rose than to face total disillusionment. Therefore, the bygone days when Zhenbao "was his own master" return. The mosquitoes bring back the memories of moral concerns which reconstruct his symbolic world. Revived in the restored order, Zhenbao thus "became a good man again." "In closing this long story as she opened it, by referring to Chen-pao as a 'good man', Chang Ai-ling [Zhang Ailing] with characteristic irony notes the inability of her protagonist to transcend his flawed vision" (Gunn 315). The "flawed vision" that bottles Zhenbao's life in the signifiers of red and white roses, on the one hand, illustrates Lacan's words that "however small the number of symbols which you might conceive of as constituting the emergence of the symbolic function as such in human life, they imply the totality of everything which is human" (*The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book II* 29). On the other hand, it demonstrates how Zhang draws a preliminary conclusion to the protagonist's life even before the story begins by entitling the story, "Red Rose and White Rose," the symbols which "imply the totality of everything" in Zhenbao's life.

## 6. The Symbolic Order and Its Disillusion

In these three stories, there is a consistent flow of binary oppositions between the east and the west which is materialized in terms of contrastive signifiers. In "The Jasmine Tea," the signifiers of Nie Jiechen and Yan Ziye respectively correspond to those of an aging China and the hopeful world outside China. The same symbols also appear in "In the Years of Youth" where Cynthia is identified with the tidiness and progression of western civilization in conflict with the dirty and vulgar Chinese represented by Pan Ruliang's family. In "Red Rose and White Rose," the opposition, though not as obvious as it is in the previous stories, still works along with the comparison between the red and white roses. Wang Jiaorui, who had once studied in England, signifies a passionate and sexy mistress, whose physical attraction sublimates the image of western beauty, while Meng Yanli is the example of a pale and frigid Chinese wife, typical of a weakling and stale China. The difference between the red and white roses also reflects that between Nie Chuanqing and Yan Danzhu, the former one being a quiet and fragile Chinese boy, the later one being an outgoing and healthy girl whose father has also studied abroad. The polarity of the signifiers distinguishes the east from the west, the old from the new, the sickly from the healthy, the hopeless from the hopeful, and the decadent from the advanced, in which China always seems to be inferior. The symbolic worlds in these stories are derived from Zhang's own life, where her father, an opium addict, takes the signifier of a corrupt China while the image of her mother, who traveled abroad after her divorce, symbolizes the strength of the west. However, people who intend to rule the symbolic order by imposing signifiers on others are indeed the ones under its command, and the signifiers they create can define no one except for the desires trailing all over their consciousness.

In his study of Lacan, Žižek manifests how people recognize and construct their desires by way of fantasies:

> Fantasy is usually conceived as a scenario that realizes the subject's desire. This elementary definition is quite adequate, on condition that we take it *literally*: what the fantasy stages is not a scene in which our desire is fulfilled, fully satisfied, but on the contrary, a scene that realizes, stages, the desire as such. The fundamental point of psychoanalysis is that desire is not something given in advance, but something that has to be constructed—and it is precisely the role of fantasy to give the coordinates of the subject's desire, to specify its object, to locate the position the subject assumes in it. It is only through fantasy that the subject is constituted as desiring, *through fantasy, we learn how to desire.* (6)

According to Žižek, fantasies function to spell out the patterns of our desires. In her autobiographic essays and her short stories, Zhang as well as the protagonists, shape and project their desires on fantasies which are incorporated into different signifiers. The signifiers therefore play out their fantasies. However, the disjunction between the signifier and the signified is as inevitable as that between fantasy and reality, which brings forth the disillusionment and witnesses the collapse of their symbolic worlds. Projecting her desires for a footloose and uninhibited life on her mother, Zhang later realizes she merely nourishes herself with an illusionary dream; her mother never lives her dream of the western world. Characters in these stories undergo the same disillusionment. Yan Ziye, the irascible and stern professor, is not the ideal father Chuanqing imagines. Cynthia does not live up to the elegance which, as far as Ruliang is concerned, signifies the glamour and nobility of foreigners. The red rose, taking flirtation as real love, does not fit into the character of a mistress, while the white rose, having an affair with her tailor, does not match the image of a virtuous wife. Being an omniscient narrator, Zhang infiltrates these stories with her own experience of the transition from fantasies to disillusionment.

Furthermore, the disillusion undermines Zhang's faith in the absolute binary relation between two signifiers. When the symbolic orders in Chuanqing, Ruliang and Zhenbao's worlds go out of control, the law of the binary oppositions also becomes invalid. Karen Kingsbury notices how Zhang tries to dismiss the idea of dichotomy and replace it with the term of *cenci de duizhao* 參差的對照 (equivocal contrast), which she elaborates in her essay, "Writing of One's Own":

> I like forthright simplicity, but I must portray the rich duplicity and elaborate designs of modern people in order to set them off against the ground of life's simplicity [...]. And yet I do not place truthfulness and hypocrisy in direct and unequivocal contrast; instead, I utilize equivocal contrast as a means of writing the truth beneath the hypocrisy of modern people and the simplicity underneath the frivolity. (*Written on Water* 18-19)

Kingsbury takes this passage as an illustration of the unsymmetrical binary style unique in Zhang's works:

> When she indicates that the duty of writers is not to divide everything into truth and falsehood, she actually criticizes the general and assertive principle of dichotomy, from which derives the binary oppositions between

> good and evil, spiritual and corporal, or traditional and modern, China and the west. She disagrees with the simple dichotomy, but rather emphasizes that different elements, especially the moral ones, are usually presented in a mutually complementing way. Thus, for example, when portraying human nature, Zhang claims that only few people are extremely good or evil. Also, it is hardly possible that there will be a dramatic transformation in their personalities. (315)

Kingsbury's words explain how Zhang puts the idea of *cenci de duizhao* into practice as she focuses on the borderland between the virtuous and immoral consciousnesses of human beings.

In her essay "Guanyu 'Qingcheng Zhilian' de Laoshihua" 關於「傾城之戀」的老實話 (A Confession concerning "Love In A Fallen City"), Zhang confirms her concept that "there are only a few people who are absolutely perverted or completely integrated" (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 15,* 104). Hence, the average person's characteristics are the combination of positive and negative, sunny and dark sides of human natures. Moreover, the signifier-takers who are supposed to satisfy the desires of other people, either in Zhang's life or in her works, always fail to overcome their shortcomings. Yan Ziye, Cynthia, Yanli and Jiaorui, not as impeccable as Chuanqing, Ruliang and Zhenbao imagine, actually cause the collapse of their symbolic worlds. But they also testify to C. T. Hsia's comments that "Eileen Chang [Zhang Ailing] evinces, then, an infinite tolerance for foibles and pretenses, a habit of sympathy catholic in its range and untouched by any degree of moral puritanism" (*A History of Modern Chinese Fiction* 414). With remarkable tolerance for the wickedness rooted in human nature, Zhang creates characters shuttling between the polarities of good and evil, fantasy and reality, desires and disillusions. However, the unavoidable shift from desire to disillusionment also determines the tragic notion of these stories.

Žižek recites a story about how the mystery of a black house deeply enchanting to people in a small village is de-mythologized by a young engineer coming from outside. What transpires in the story is how people reflect at the moment of disillusionment. After the engineer declares that the house is nothing but an ordinary ruin, the men in the village who harbor the fantasy for a long time feel irritated:

> The men are horrified when the engineer begins to leave, one of them wildly attacks him. The engineer unfortunately falls to the ground and soon afterwards dies. Why were the men so horrified by the action of the newcomer? We can grasp their resentment by remarking the difference between reality and the "other scene" of the fantasy space: the "black house" was forbidden to the men because it functioned as an empty space wherein they could project their nostalgic desires, their distorted memories; by publicly stating that the "black house" was nothing but an old ruin, the young intruder reduced their fantasy space to everyday, common reality. He annulled the difference between reality and fantasy space, depriving the men of the place in which they were able to articulate their desires. (8-9)

Denied access to conveying their desires, the men burst into a fit of indignation, which also happens to the protagonists in these stories. Chuanqing, originally a feminine and fragile boy, gives Danzhu a brutal beating, as he blames her for his unfulfilled desires. Zhenbao, a well-organized man who boasts of self-control, flings the furnishings in the direction of his wife who shatters his dream of the white rose. Ruliang, not infuriated by the disillusionment, simply falls into total despair. But to stop sketching, for him, is to give up fantasizing. Zhang, on the other hand, circumvents her fury by transforming her unfulfilled fantasies into the contents of her work. She lavishes her anger and agony on reconstructing the bitter memories of disillusionment. C. T. Hsia discerns how Zhang makes a cause and effect relation between desire and disillusion in her works. He professes that what is involved in the stories of *Chuanqi* "is the condition of a soul unpropped by its usual stays of vanity and desire" (*A History of Modern Chinese Fiction* 397). The lack of vanity and desire ingrains in these stories Zhang's tragic insights which suggest that "most of her characters make puny efforts to steer a middle path between romance and tragedy. If their world is still sad, it is not only because life allows so few unalloyed joys, but because the very process of adjustment implies cowardice and disillusion" (Hsia, *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction* 413). In other words, her characters are always torn between the instinctive passions for the projection of their desires and the inevitable disillusions of their fantasies. Zhang's depiction of the change from desire to disillusion in these stories echoes the Lacanian notion that the "object of desire" always eludes "our grasp no matter what we do to attain it" (Žižek 4). Desire, no matter how overwhelming it is, is destined to be constrained within the frame of reality, and the hope to transcend reality by virtue of fantasies proves to be illusionary as well.

# Chapter Three

## A Bakhtinian Reading of Four Stories in *Chuanqi*—"Great Felicity", "Steamed Osmanthus Flower Ah Xiao's Unhappy Autumn", "Love in a Fallen City", and" Traces of Love"

This chapter deals with the relations between discourse and ideology, which will lead to the exploration of the conflicts caused by different interpretations of life.

Bakhtin's concepts concerning novels examined here claim that the function of characters' discourses is to shape their ideologies and inform readers of their views on the world. Novels display the multiple voices of different people. Each of them is in dialogue with and also in conflict with one another. The mosaic of the variety of languages and ideologies defines the term heteroglossia.

The Bakhtinian reading of the fictional structure steers my concerns to the discourses in Zhang's stories. Thus, I was motivated and inspired to discover how the discourses of characters serve to be the portrayal of their ideas, and how the intersection of these ideas in conversation demonstrates their incompatibility.

The fact that Zhang's writing usually boasts of its delicate descriptions of interpersonal relationships helps me to investigate in these four stories the ideas each character adopts by means of the careful study of their interactions. Furthermore, when trying to reason out their conflict, I arrived at the answer that the disagreements between characters due to their different ideologies are actually caused by their selfish views on life. These conflicts are insoluble because human beings are rooted in self-centered desires.

The plots invite close attention as well, as I found that there are not many overly dramatic elements in these four stories. Three of them can be taken as a slice of life, while "Love in a Fallen City," being the exception since it is enmeshed within the events of a war and a romance between a rake and a divorcee, is structured in a way that the ideological battles looms larger than real war.

To minimize the dramatic effects in her stories, on the one hand, testifies to Zhang's perception of life being composed of few heroic deeds or sentimental loves, but of the ordinary communication in which arguments over petty issues are imbued. On the other, it is related to Zhang's interpretation of Chinese religion, in which she argues that the Chinese have faith not in metaphysical theology but in the skilful maneuvering of relationships. Zhang's unique definition of the religious psychology of Chinese people also reveals her obsession with China, which will further flourish in her essay "Zhongguo de Riye" 中國的日夜 (Days and Nights of China).

## 1. Discourse as Ideology and Dialogized Heteroglossia

The Bakhtinian theory employed in this chapter is based on the assumption that language is the vehicle of thought. Therefore, "we are taking language not as a system of abstract grammatical categories, but rather language conceived as ideologically saturated, language as a world view, even as a concrete opinion" ( Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel" 271). In other words, languages are value-charged. "Each utterance carries with it the aura of a particular idea-system" ( Kershner 22). Given the study of novels, the relation between language and thought is turned into that between discourses and ideologies. In his essay, "Discourse in the Novel," Bakhtin claims that "the speaking person in the novel is always, to one degree or another, an *ideologue*, and his words are always *ideologemes.* A particular language in a novel is always a particular way of viewing the world, one that strives for a social significance" (333). Hence, the Bakhtinian reading of novels equates language and ideology. It suggests that each speaking person in the novel is an ideologue, a person who harbors and advocates a unique set of ideas, philosophy, and perspectives. What one speaks is simply to act out one's belief, and from one's words, readers can envisage one's attitudes toward life. Thus, discourses in the novel are characters' individual expressions of their interpretations of life.

Furthermore, for Bakhtin, the discourse of characters plays a pivotal role in novels. Following his words, what "makes a novel a novel" and what "is responsible for its stylistic uniqueness" are "the *speaking person and his discourse,*" because "the novel requires speaking persons bringing with them their own unique ideological discourses, their own language" ("Discourse in the Novel" 332). Discourse becomes the object of representation in the novel because the ideologies will infiltrate the words of the characters. Accordingly, "the activity of a character in a novel is always ideologically demarcated; he lives and acts in an ideological world of his own" ("Discourse in the Novel" 335). To study a novel is to learn how to have an insight into the languages incorporated in it. "Thus, when an aesthete undertakes to write a novel, his aestheticism is not revealed in the novel's formal construction, but exclusively in the fact that in the novel there is represented a speaking person who happens to be an ideologue for aestheticism" ("Discourse in the Novel" 333).

With regard to the discourse in a novel, Bakhtin's concern also includes the interaction between the speaker and the listener. The ideology of the speaker and that of the listener are equally weighted, and the dialogic interactions between the interlocutors decide the way the characters express themselves. As Holquist paraphrases:

> Speakers' evaluative attitudes toward what they are talking about (even attempting to be neutral is to enact certain values), plus their judgment of to whom they are talking, determine the choice of language units (lexical,

> grammatical) and communication units (the composition of the utterance, the speech genres employed). This evaluative component of speech is what determines the expressive aspect of the utterance. (65)

Communication means dialogue, both implying the encounter and intersection not only between two dialogists but also between two ideologies, and the term dialogism "takes on its more precise characteristics, such as the 'mixing of intentions of speaker and listener', the creation of meaning out of past utterance, and the constant need for utterances to position themselves in relation to one another" (Vice 45).

Bakhtin's discussion of dialogue and dialogism carries the connotation of the inevitable presence of both the speaker and the listener in every discourse, even when the listener is temporarily invisible:

> [E]very word is directed toward an *answer* and cannot escape the profound influence of the answering word that it anticipates.
>
> The word in living conversation is directly, blatantly, oriented toward a future answer-word: it provokes an answer, anticipates it and structures itself in the answer's direction. Forming itself in an atmosphere of the already spoken, the word is at the same time determined by that which has not yet been said but which is needed and in fact anticipated by the answering word [...].
>
> All rhetorical forms, monologic in their compositional structure, are oriented toward the listener and its answer. This orientation toward the listener is usually considered the basic constitutive feature of rhetorical

> discourse. ("Discourse in the Novel" 280)

On the one hand, Bakhtin argues that languages are always in dialogical relationships with one another. Each word from the speaker, whether the listener is available or not, always anticipates the response. On the other, it suggests that the consciousness of the character is worthy of serious attention. Consciousness is the monologue flowing in the character's mind. Thus, the consciousness of a character may reveal both his unspoken ideas and the replies he expects from the listener. As Todorov remarks, "the utterance is not the business of the speaker alone, but the result of his or her interaction with a listener, whose reactions he or she integrates in advance" (43). As a result, the speaker's "orientation toward the listener is an orientation toward a specific world of the listener [...].The speaker strives to get a reading on his own word, and on his own conceptual system that determines this word, within the alien conceptual system of the understanding receiver" (Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel" 282). This is what Bakhtin recognizes as the "actual life of speech" where "every act of understanding is active: it assimilates the word to be understood into its own conceptual system filled with specific objects and emotional expressions, and is indissolubly merged with the response, with a motivated agreement or disagreement" (Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel" 282). The dynamic between the speaker and the listener, between the uttered and the replied, and between two distinct or discrepant conceptual systems sees the shaping of the idea of heteroglossia.

Heteroglossia is the arena where different ideologies are confronted with one another. Following Holquist's rendition:

> Heteroglossia is a situation, the situation of a subject surrounded by the

> myriad responses he or she might make at any particular point [...].
>
> Heteroglossia is a way of conceiving the world as made up of a roiling mass of languages, each of which has its own distinct formal marker, for each has associated with it a set of distinctive values and presuppositions." (69)

As far as Bakhtin is concerned, the novel as a literary genre best performs the elements of heteroglossia, because it is a hybrid of various kinds of "ideologically freighted discourses" (Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel" 333) that produce "a plenitude of meanings, which stem from social interaction (dialogue)" (Raman, Widdowson and Brooker 42).

The marker of the novel style is its multiplicity of voices. Moreover, as "speech is always rooted in a particular material situation that contributes a significant part of its meaning", to study a novel is to investigate "the kinds of material situations in which speech occurs" ( Kershner 22). Accordingly, a novel features its incorporation of miscellaneous situations where a variety of languages cross one another. Bakhtin gives his own explanation of heteroglossia and lays his stress on the point that in heteroglossia, languages do dialogize with each other:

> The novel can be defined as a diversity of social speech types (sometimes even diversity of languages) and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized [...].The novel orchestrates all its themes, the totality of the world of objects and ideas depicted and expressed in it, by means of the individual voices that flourish under such conditions. Authorial speech, the speech of narrators, inserted genres, the speech of characters are

> merely these fundamental compositional unities with whose help heteroglossia [...] can enter the novel; each of them permits a multiplicity of social voices and wide variety of their links and interrelationships (always more or less dialogized). These distinctive links and interrelationships between utterances and languages, this movement of the theme through different languages and speech types, its dispersion into the rivulets and droplets of social heteroglossia, its dialogization—this is the basic distinguishing feature of the stylistics of the novel. ("Discourse in the Novel" 262-63)

Thus, the novel is dialogic "when these languages within the novel take account of each other, answer each other back" (Holquist 65).

Further, the dialogic nature of languages in a novel implies that different ideologies are not only in dialogue with one another, but also collide with one another. "'Dialogized heteroglossia' refers to the combative relations different languages enter into when they come into contact, most perceptible in a text. The socially varying values and accents of novelistic languages result in unevenness, unstable positions, shifts up and down a hierarchy worked out in the novel itself" (Vice 49). The "combative relation" suggests that different ideologies are always intertwined with one another in a belligerent way, due to the insoluble dissent among them. Even if "all words and forms are populated by [the] intentions" (Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel" 293) of the characters, none of them is dominant and imperative. Instead, all the arguments are equally important and persuasive. The competitive match between different discourses results in a continuous contest between different value-systems, "one point of view opposed to another, one evaluation opposed to another, one accent opposed to another"(Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel" 314).

Bakhtin claims that the novelist should try not to favor either side of the conflicting voices:

> The author utilizes now one language, now another, in order to avoid giving himself up wholly to either of them; he makes use of this verbal give-and-take, this dialogue of languages at every point in his work, in order that he himself might remain as it were neutral with regard to language, a third party in a quarrel between two people. ("Discourse in the Novel" 314)

As a result, there is no final judgment coming out of these clashes. The author's effort is to display the diversity of ideological discourses that help to build up characters' images. Therefore, the discord among different voices not only confirms Bakhtin's words that to examine each dialogue in the novel is to expose "it as a contradiction-ridden, tension-filled unity of two embattled tendencies in the life of language" ("Discourse in the Novel" 272). It also implies that the interrelationships among characters in the novel are often disharmonious, and their disputes will reach no absolute arbitration.

My Bakhtinian reading of four stories in *Chuanqi* focuses on the examination of dialogues and monologues, with which Zhang accomplishes the characterization of the protagonists and from which we can elicit the ideologies each character lives with. It aims to display how characters are frustrated when entering into relationships with each other, on account of their different interpretations of life which dwell on their own profits and reflect their egoistic concerns. As Zhang bemoans at the end of her essay, "From the Ashes," people are pathetic and solitary as we are always enslaved by the desires of being selfish:

> The vehicle of the times drives inexorably forward. We ride along, passing through thoroughfares that are perhaps already quite familiar. Against a sky lit by flames, they are capable nevertheless of shaking us to the core. What a shame we occupy ourselves instead searching for shadows of ourselves in the shop windows that flit so quickly by—we see only our own faces, pallid and trivial. In our selfishness and emptiness, in our smug and shameless ignorance, every one of us is like all the others. And each of us is alone. (*Written on Water* 52)

Selfishness becomes the most intrinsic and inextricable desire. This desire instigates one to hold a view of life that adheres to one's own personal advantage; there is a lack of altruism and thus conflict between the interests of each individual ensues.

In addition, the narrator's voice, which functions either to reveal the character's consciousness or to create an atmosphere that infers the polemic relationships among characters, also calls for careful study. As Leo Ou-fan Lee remarks, the narration is "how Chang [Zhang] wields her fictional magic on the reader: the narrative voice places itself both inside and outside the world of the fictional characters, deriving its inspiration from both the narrative situation in the story and an external vantage point above it" (286). When characters are enmeshed in disharmonious relationships, the battle caused by their incompatible ideologies, however, is left with no resolution. At the end of the stories, there is only "an endless clash of 'unmerged souls'" (Gardiner 25) that divulges the writer's lack of intention in making any judgment. As a novelist, Zhang holds similar views on novel style and plays the neutral role in the strife of characters. Her attempt to present frictions without biasing against any character rescues readers from the simple dichotomy that puts characters into contrastive groups of good or evil. The ambiguous moral scrutiny of each character demonstrates that Zhang once again implements in these stories her concept of *cenci de duizhao*, which contends that human beings are the mixture of virtue and vice. Moreover, to portray the diversity and subtlety of relationships among people shows Zhang's potential imitation of the writing skills she appreciates in the Chinese novel, *Hai Shang Hua Liezhuan* 海上花列傳 (*Sing-Song Girls of Shanghai*).

In 1982, in a special issue of the magazine *Renditions*, Zhang's English translation of the first two chapters of *Sing-Song Girls of Shanghai* appears, followed by an essay discussing the narrative methods in this novel. The author of the essay, Stephen Cheng, gives a brief introduction of the novel at the very beginning of his article:

> *Sing-Song Girls of Shanghai* 海上花列傳 by Han Pang-ch'ing(Han Bangqing)韓邦慶 (1856-94) is the first realistic novel exclusively devoted to an examination of courtesan life, the 'flowers' of the Chinese title being a euphemism for courtesans. It is also the first novel of which all the dialogues are in the Wu dialect. ("Sing-song Girls of Shanghai and Its Narrative Methods" 111)

In the translator's note, Zhang points out that the novel was "not a best-seller when first published in 1892," and "this little-known masterpiece went out of print a second time in the 1930's after its discovery by Hu Shih and others in the May Fourth Movement" (qtd. in Han 95). The fact that *Sing-song Girls of Shanghai* never became popular is due to the dialogues being in Wu dialect, the language only known to people living around the area of Soochow. Aware of the reason why readers have failed to appreciate this classic, Zhang at first translates it into Mandarin and, later on, into English. She confesses in her essay "Yi Hu Shizhi"憶胡適之 (In Memory of Hu Shi) that what motivates her to do the translation of the novel is to help readers "overcome the difficulty of the Wu dialect" (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 8,* 151).

Even before working on the translation of the novel, Zhang has "long been familiar with the book" (Han 96) since her adolescence. Then, in "In Memory of Hu Shi," she comes to the realization that *Sing-song Girls of Shanghai* could not really win the readers' heart, not only because of the Wu dialect but also because it "lacks the elements of romances and is not sentimental at all" (Zhang, *Zhang Ailing Quanji 8,* 152). As far as she is concerned, however, the lack of sentimental appeal is the reason the book is worth reading. The novel features numerous dialogues and sparse descriptions of action that "weave together the texture of daily life of the ordinary people" (A. Zhang, *Zhang Ailing Quanji 8,* 152). Therefore, as Zhang puts it, though "it is the story about the prostitutes in Shanghai eighty years ago, there is nothing flamboyant here. Among all the books I have read, this one most succeeds in portraying the domestic atmosphere" (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 8,* 153). Zhang values "the domestic atmosphere" enormously because it reflects "the texture of life" of the mediocre, whose life is composed of neither legendary episodes nor romantic loves, but tiffs caused by different ideas about trivial issues.

For Zhang, to portray the contradiction of ideologies among human beings is to bring her writing closer to the true colors of life, which, as she defines in the essay "Writing of One's Own," rings with the notion of life being placid and static:

> I have discovered that people who like to write literature usually concentrate on the uplifting and dynamic aspects of life and neglect those

> that are placid and static, though the latter is the ground of the former. Very few works in the history of literature plainly sing in praise of the placid, while many emphasize the dynamic and uplifting aspects of human life. But in the best of these works, the uplifting aspects of human life are still portrayed against the background of its inherent placidity. Without this grounding, uplifting is like so much froth. Many works are forceful enough to provide excitement but unable to offer any real revolution, and this failure results from not having grasped this notion of grounding. (*Written on Water* 16)

This paragraph can be taken as Zhang's literary theory which argues that the canons of great works depend on how much the author stresses the placid aspect of life. In contrast to the "uplifting and dynamic" side of life, the idea of "inherent placidity" suggests that life by nature is rather flat and thus stable. What actually occupies the life of ordinary people is not the flamboyant adventure of heroes. Rather, it is a series of episodes about encounters, interactions, conversations, disagreements and compromises that happen every day in every household. It is the "domestic atmosphere" that contributes to the achievement of *Sing-song Girls of Shanghai*.

Convinced that the placid is the foundation of life, Zhang begrudges sensational formulas in her stories. Her protagonists are far from the achievements of remarkable feats. They are nobodies whose lives are not marked by salient success. She believes that "writing in this manner is more true to life." Moreover, "although they are merely weak and ordinary people and cannot aspire to heroic feats of strength, it is precisely these ordinary people who can serve more accurately than these heroes as a measure of the times" (A. Zhang, *Written on Water* 17). Zhang once professes that she is "incapable of writing the kind of work that people usually refer to as a 'monument of an era'" where the theme of the works always concentrate on the "uplifting and dynamic" aspect of life. Not interested in producing epics, she intends to write about "some of the trivial things that happen between men and women. There is no war and no revolution in my works" (*Written on Water* 18). It is unconventional for a writer to make the "trivial things" between men and women outshine the magnificence of war and revolution. However, as Nicole Huang remarks in the introduction to *Written on Water*, "the meticulous attention an individual pays to seemingly trivial details of life then takes up subversive meanings" (*Written on Water* XVI). The "subversive meaning" in Zhang's works derives from the fact that the petty and frivolous relations of people speak louder than war and revolution. It is the "weak and ordinary people" who involve their lives in these trivial things that become the spokespersons of the times.

Accordingly, the stories surveyed in this chapter are provided with few dramatic plots. As Shui Jing points out, in some of Zhang's stories, the structure of " 'Qi、Cheng、Zhuan、He' 起承轉合 that readers can usually detect in novels" is almost absent (*Zhang Ailing Weiwan* 35). The idea of "Qi、Cheng、Zhuan、He" is a Chinese technical term derived from the works of the Yuan literary critic, Fan Deji 范德璣, which refers to "the structure of literary works in terms of beginning, rising action, climax and reversal, and resolution" (*Xuedian* 學典 1221). The dramatic waves of the storylines create an exciting chemistry in stories. But, in these stories, the plots are replete with trivial conflicts among characters with dissonant ideologies. These conflicts, as Zhang defines them, are the embodiment of the "solemn but subtle agitation, an intense but as yet indefinable struggle" (*Written on Water* 18). The parallels between solemn and subtle, intense and indefinable illustrates the contradictory nature of the struggle which seems serious to the people involved in it while it is actually insignificant compared to the heroic deeds in the works called "monument[s] of an era." Nevertheless, it is the characters' struggles over trivial issues that establish the ground of life.

For Bakhtin, the idea of heteroglossia is to celebrate the diversity of voices in a novel, whereas the same concept, as an approach to the studies of Zhang's stories, is to bespeak the incompatible ideologies among people. At this point, the aura of celebration is transformed into a serious and heavy one, which helps us to perceive that the conflicts caused by misunderstanding and incommunicability among human beings tinge life with tragic sense. In these stories, it is through the dialogic interaction between characters that this tragic sense is brought out. The stories evince Zhang's belief that to "depict the intricacy of human relationship[s]" (Cheng, "Themes and Techniques in Eileen Chang's Stories" 179) and to delineate the frustrations one encounters because of the frictions in relationships are both to demonstrate one's desire for self-interest and to imitate the patterns of life. Moreover, Zhang's particular emphasis on relationships provides us a further connection to her essay "Zhongguoren de Zongjiao" 中國人的宗教 (The Religion of the Chinese), where she presents an innovative opinion in claiming that the Chinese religion is actually a religion about relationships.

## 2. Ideologies and Heteroglossia in "Great Felicity"

The female protagonist, Yuqing 玉清, is about to get married and busies herself with preparing her dowry. The story begins with her sisters-in-law, Lou Erqiao 婁二喬 and Lou Simei 婁四美, making fun of her bony figure while they are trying on dresses at a clothing emporium. They make great use of their sharp tongues as they make an evaluation of their future sister-in-law:

> The two of them burst into giggles. Erqiao looked around them, 'Shh!

> Shh!' Then Simei said, 'She is so stiff you could say "when thrown to the ground there arises the music of bronze bells and stone drums"!' Erqiao laughed. "Where did you get that? Aren't you poetic! But really, we wouldn't have known what she really looks like if we hadn't been trying on clothes together. Our poor brother...for the rest of his life....' Simei doubled up with laughter, 'The slightest touch and you can hear her bones knocking together. It is probably all right dancing with her, because the music would drown it out. It's a bit strange really. It's not that she's at all thin, so why is she all bones?'
>
> Erqiao said, 'Big frame.'
>
> 'Her skin is white enough, it's just a pity she reminds you the other way of the White Bone Demon!' Erqiao laughed and gave her a slap, 'It's not *that* bad. Ah, poor brother. No use telling him now. It's too late....' (trans. by Janet Ng with Janice Wickeri, in *Traces of Love* 37-38)

To put an end to the last sentence, it might be too late for the Lou sisters to inform their brother about the skinniness of his wife, and too late to save him from marrying a woman with no physical allure. The dialogue invests in the minds of readers a lanky image of Yuqing even before she appears to defend herself.

Not long after their talk does the narrator give Yuqing her revenge on the Lou sisters as it is pointed out that:

> she [Yuqing] was not as ungainly as her sisters-in-law make her out to be. At least, not in the silvery-white, long-sleeved wedding gown. Thus

> formally attired, she was very presentable—what the newspaper ads might call a lady of refinement. In comparison, Erqiao and Simei were simply young ladies of the *nouveau riche.*" (*Traces of Love* 39)

The fact that Yuqing is "not as ungainly as her sisters-in-law make her out to be" only implies that the Lou sisters' despising of her is groundless and unreasonable. But it also foreshadows the inharmonious relationship in the Lou family, where none can escape from conflict.

Yuqing's figure is not the only thing that annoys the Lou sisters. After the sneer about her boniness, Erqiao and Simei begin to question her real age:

> Simei said, 'I think she must be at least thirty.'
>
> 'Brother is twenty-six; she is saying that she is twenty-six too.'
>
> 'It wouldn't be hard to find out. She has so many younger brothers and sisters. If she faked her age, then the younger ones would have to fake theirs too. It's easy to tell from the little ones.' (*Traces of Love* 38)

The conversation in which the Lou sisters put no trust in Yuqing's age suggests that, on the one hand, Yuqing looks older than she should be. On the other, she might be trying to fake her age lest people will think the bride-to-be is, rather than a young lady, already a spinster. According to Shui Jing, the name Yuqing refers to the feminine quality of *bing qing yu jie* 冰清玉潔 (as clean as ice and as pure as jade) (*Zhang Ailing Weiwan* 10). In other words, Yuqing is supposed to be a noble lady. However, the discourse of the Lou sisters only transforms her image into that of a middle-aged woman, who, threatened by her vanishing youth, strains to marry into a wealthy family.

The question concerning Yuqing's real age becomes the topic of choice among most of her siblings. Suddenly, however, Erqiao and Simei lose their passion in tracking down Yuqing's age and start worrying whether her poor relatives will follow her steps and marry another brother of theirs:

> Erqiao wagged a cautioning finger at Simei. 'Watch out. After big brother marries Yuqing, there's still another brother left at home. I'm afraid they all have their eyes on him too. Can't blame them for being envious. Yuqing is just no match for our brother—and I'm not the only one who thinks so. Her relatives are even more unspeakable. Each one poorer than the last. (*Traces of Love* 38-39)

For the Lou sisters, Yuqing and her relatives are a group of destitute and desperate women who crave for their brothers and their fortune. Being fastidous toward their sister-in-law, Erqiao and Simei have already excluded Yuqing from the Lou family even before the wedding, and the dialogue between them only foreshadows the conflict that will happen sooner or later when they talk with her.

The clash between the Lou sisters and Yuqing becomes more obvious as they tend to devaluate what she buys:

> Erqiao asked Yuqing, 'Are you almost done shopping?'
>
> Yuqing frowned, 'Not nearly! I've been running around all morning. It's so hard to shop these days. Things that are even passable are too expensive.

> But you can't not buy them either, because they will just be more expensive later.' Erqiao put out a hand. 'Let me see the dress fabric you bought.' Yuqing handed her a package [...]. 'Pattern's not bad.' Simei said, 'It was quite popular for a while last year.' Erqiao said, 'But I'm afraid it will fade. I had something like that. It got all washed out.' Yuqing blushed and snatched the package back, saying, 'The difference is in the quality. They have a cheaper version of the same pattern. But I am the type who won't buy anything that won't last. (*Traces of Love* 40-41)

Yuqing has to defend her right to spend money, while the Lou sisters remind her that the quality of the silk-linen is not reliable, suggesting that they think Yuqing has spent her money on commodities that are not worth buying.

The narrator then uncovers the reason why Yuqing's purchases irritate the Lou sisters. "After Erqiao and Simei had inspected Yuqing's purchases, they felt personally cheated. Even when they tried to look at it objectively, from the outside, they still couldn't help feeling that it was a shame the stupid woman spent her money in such bad taste" (*Traces of Love* 41-42). Not calculative in spending her money, Yuqing agitates the Lou sisters by her squandering of money and her stupidity. In addition, a more intense conflict between Yuqing and her sisters-in-law is caused by the fact that they are rivaling for more attention than Yuqing during the wedding. "Each of them felt that hers was the most important role in the wedding. For Erqiao and Simei, Yuqing was the dazzling white caption to appear on the silver screen at the end of a movie—'The End,' while they were the exciting previews for the 'Next Change'" (*Traces of Love* 39). In other words, for the Lou sisters, Yuqing is about to pass the prime moment in her life. Once married, she will never be the prey men pursue. About to lose her value, Yuqing does not deserve such expensive products.

On the contrary, however, Yuqing has a very different philosophy from her future sisters-in-laws. Aware that marriage will ruin her popularity among men, therefore, she decides to lavish her remaining single days on shopping:

> She believed that a woman only had one chance in her life to indulge herself, and she should make the most of it. Whatever she saw, she bought, as if there was no tomorrow. There was a kind of valediction and desolation in her heart. Her sadness as she shopped for her trousseau was not entirely put on." (*Traces of Love* 41)

Yuqing and the Lou sisters are the first set of antagonistic ideologies in this story. The conflict between them comes from the discrepancy in facing the gnawing moment when a woman is worried to see her worth fade away. The Lou sisters cannot understand Yuqing's anxiety before marriage. They simply define her purchases as the behavior of a prodigal woman with a taste no one admires. Nor could Yuqing realize the malicious derision and callous disdain the Lou sisters employ to inflate themselves as single and young women. The collision between them is depicted through dialogues that are filled with petty arguments over who is buying what, and the narration that exposes the character's consciousness only widens the gap between them.

Lou Xiaobo 婁囂伯 and his wife are the second set of opponent ideologies in this story. Mr. Lou, the father of the bridegroom, evaluates his marriage differently than his wife. Xiaobo thinks his wife does not deserve such a remarkable husband as he, but Mrs. Lou, aware of her husband's contempt, regards herself as the sacrifice in an arranged marriage. Their inharmonious relationship is staged when Mr. Lou cannot bear his wife's clumsiness in making shoes for her new daughter-in-law:

> The other rose-coloured shoe upper was still in Mrs. Lou's hands. When Xiaobo saw it, he couldn't help saying, 'Must you do that in the midst of everything? Can't you put it aside?' Looking at his wife, he could have gone on and on: 'Do you *have* to cut your hair in a duck tail? If it's convenience you're after, just shave your head. Do you *have* to wear lilac stockings? And do you *have* to roll them down below your knees? Do you *have* to let your black slip show through the slit of your cheongsam?' His voice would be strained with impatience, yet he would adopt a conciliatory tone, for he had a reputation for being a good husband. Who else would have found someone like Mrs. Lou through a matchmaker, and come back from his studies abroad to have four children with her, and stick with her for thirty years? (44)

Mr. Lou's complaints about his wife's hairdo, lilac stockings and the exposed black slip explain his discontentment with her. The narrative voice, which proves that he meets the requirements of a good husband, also drops the hint about Mr. Lou being unfairly treated by having children with such a woman who can anger him even with simple daily trifles.

The narrator's concern then shifts to Mrs. Lou, reading her thoughts in an attempt to study their unhappy marriage from her perspective:

> Mr. and Mrs. Lou were such a mismatched couple that many people felt indignant on his behalf. Mrs. Lou knew this very well and it angered her. Though she often let him have his way in private, she deliberately insulted her husband in front of others, just to show them how Mr. Lou both loved

> and feared her, that things were not as outsiders might think. Because there were two maids in the room preparing for the wedding, Mrs. Lou could not let what Mr. Lou had said to her go. She immediately scowled and said, 'What does my making shoes have to do with you? Busybody!'
>
> Xiaobo said nothing more [...].
>
> Mrs. Lou realized that Xiaobao was annoyed. It was all because she wanted to save face when there were people around. She had always resented the people around her. It wasn't as if she didn't realize that if the people who cared about her were all to die, leaving her and her husband to rattle around in the empty house alone, her husband would not bother about her at all. Why be a responsible husband when there's no one to see? She knew that she should really be grateful to the people around her, so she hated them even more. (*Traces of Love* 45-46)

Mrs. Lou angrily retorts her husband, even if it is a lie, in order to present the image in public that she still can get the upper hand in their battles. However, the narrative discloses Mrs. Lou's deep fear that once there is no one around, she knows her husband will just brush her aside. Thus, the words she yells out to preserve her dignity, ironically betrays her inferior position.

When it comes to the plan of purchasing the furniture, another argument befalls Mr. and Mrs. Lou. Xiaobo's son, Lou Dalu 婁大陸 spends most of his money on paltry things. As a result, his wedding budget becomes too tight to buy a bed. While Mrs. Lou thinks of giving him her own bed, her suggestion soon provokes Mr. Lou:

> While they were talking, Xiaobo came out, bathrobe over his shoulders, and pointed at Mrs. Lou with his glasses which were all steamed up. "That's so typical of all of you. Leaving everything until the last possible minute. When I saw that suite of teak furniture at the auction house last year, I wanted to buy it for Dalu. You wouldn't listen to me then.'...Mrs. Lou was afraid father and son might get into a row and quickly said, 'Really, it's a pity we didn't buy it at the time. Since Dalu would have gotten married sooner or later, we couldn't have gone wrong with it.' Xiaobo stuck out his chin, 'Do I have to take care of everything in this household? What have you been doing? Whenever the children were absent from school, I had to be the one to write their excuses.' These two things weren't really related, but Mrs. Lou knew that Xiaobo had more than once made the same kind of complaint in front of the relatives. (*Traces of Love* 48)

Mr. Lou is enraged by such a petty thing. His anger then goes beyond the episode of purchasing furniture and evolves into a series of complaints about his wife. The connection between buying a bed and writing excuses just surpasses logic. To let slip the chance of getting an auctioned bed is totally unrelated to Mrs. Lou's incompetence in taking care of the household. She understands her husband's ire is unreasonable as well. The issue of the bed is only a catalyst which incites Xiaobo to humiliate his wife and vent his discontentment with her.

Mrs. Lou also thinks of counterattacking in the same way. She attempts to blame his ridiculous anger on his sense of anxiety and impatience caused by an extramarital affair:

> Though she felt that her husband was justified, she had her own grievance

> and felt deprived of an outlet. Suddenly it all welled up within her and she wanted to answer back: 'If we have been treating you badly here at home, then don't come back! I'm sure you have another woman outside. That's why you keep finding fault with things at home—this won't do, that won't do.' Then she remembered that she was going to be a mother-in-law soon and swallowed her words. (*Traces of Love* 48-49)

Her accusation, however, merely hovers in her mind and is never spoken. In this scene of conflict, Xiaobo is offered the opportunity to pour his disappointment over his marriage. However, as he is irritated by the triviality of buying a bed, the following complaints seem arbitrary and unpersuasive. The result is that, rather than informing Mrs. Lou of his dissatisfaction with her, Xiaobo only instigates his wife to suspect his faithfulness and to grumble about him. They are not only lacking communication, but even interactive arguments. The unidirectional accusations coming from Mr. Lou's mouth and the mute complaints in Mrs. Lou's mind merely aggravate the misunderstanding between them.

The narrative voice then launches a report about Mrs. Lou's grief in an unhappy marriage:

> They were, after all, father and son. Mrs. Lou felt isolated. The whole Lou family, her husband, her children, the young and old, so handsome, so competitive, she love them all and they, time after time, banded together to think of different ways to prove her inadequate. Her husband had always been concerned about his reputation even when they were poor. He had always loved to socialize and was therefore always putting her in various embarrassing situations and, time and again, finding that she didn't measure up. As the family became wealthy, it should have meant an easier

> time, but she hadn't realized that as the parties became grander, she would find herself even more inadequate.
>
> However, if you told her to live differently, to forgo the nice clothes, the visits and return visits, she would be unhappy then too and feel bereft [...] she couldn't even articulate to herself her own misery. (*Traces of Love* 49-50)

The narration can be read as Mrs. Lou's inner monologue. It spells out her evaluation of her marriage and herself. Mrs. Lou is quite aware that she fails to satisfy her husband. She is quite unsociable, dressed embarrassingly shabby in front of visitors. She is obviously inferior to her good-looking and competent family. However, she is unable to disengage herself from the current life which offers her the vanity of social activities. Dangling between the limbo of her aspiration for a sociable life and her poor sociability, Mrs. Lou cannot even explain to herself the tragedy of her life, let alone handle the communication that might lead to the mutual understanding between her and her husband.

At the end of the story, the newlyweds, together with Yuqing's parents, come to visit the Lou family on the second day of the wedding. Xiaobo is elated by discussing international affairs with his son, while others are silent and idle. Suddenly, he "ended his discussion of current affairs" (*Traces of Love* 57), and addresses a question to Yuqing:

> 'How does it feel to be married? It's all right, isn't it?'
>
> Yuqing hesitated a little, then, with all the aplomb she could command, she

> replied, 'It's fine.' After she had said that, she blushed.
>
> They all laughed, but were slightly ill at ease, not certain if they should have laughed or not. Mrs. Lou knew that her husband had made a joke, but she didn't really catch what he said, so she laughed the loudest. (*Traces of Love* 57-58)

Sarcasm suggests itself here when Xiaobo asks his daughter-in-law about her marriage, because he does not even have a full understanding about his own marriage. Before he gets any reply, Mr. Lou tags to his own question a positive answer, which is obviously contrary to the reality of his own marriage. What's more ironic, the joke makes Mrs. Lou roar with laughter since she does not know what her husband has just said. Their relationship becomes harmonious only when there is no interaction between them. Xiaobo's question thus functions to show the incommunicability between him and his wife. Moreover, Yuqing's reply is an omen that she may try to conceal the truth of her unhappy marriage as Xiaobo has been doing for thirty years. The reality of her marriage, which begins with her argument over the items she bought with the Lou sisters, should not be wrapped in the simple word "fine." At the end of the story, the author just posts a dialogue that alludes to the ideological collision between each character.

The title "Great Felicity" indicates the joyful and festive mood people feel during the wedding. Nevertheless, the whole story is about the inharmonious interrelationships among the Lou family. Though the characters are of the same family, they are characterized by different ideologies that pit one against another. The dialogues in this story become a scene of heteroglossia where different voices intersect and debate. Their arguments which are all about trivial issues such as purchases, clothes, dowries, and the bride's figure incur the sneer, suspect, disdain and discontent among the Lou family, without ever reaching a consensus. There is nothing felicitous here. As Shui Jing points out, it means something when Zhang has all the characters in this story live in a world full of "mirrors, glasses, glass, and white porcelain… etc.—they are all fragile and breakable" (*Zhang Ailing de Xiaoshuo Yishu* 174). Even the hall where the wedding ceremony is held is decorated with "black glass and a black glass altar." Furthermore, "the huge room with its colorful decorations was like a big glass globe" (*Traces of Love* 52). The breakable glass implies the broken relationships among the characters, and through the conflicting discourses of each character, the tragedy of the marriages of two generations in the Lou family—Mrs. Lou and Yuqing—is also given its illustration.

### 3. Ideologies and Heteroglossia in "Steamed Osmanthus Flower Ah Xiao's Unhappy Autumn"

The story is actually a daily chronicle of a Shanghai maid, Ding Ah Xiao 丁阿小, whose ideology is posed as an antithesis to that of her employer, Garter 哥兒達. Ah Xiao is a diligent and enthusiastic mother. She is the incarnation of the Mother Earth, a character in O'Neil's play *The Great God Brown*. In her essay "Speaking of Women," Zhang expresses her admiration for Mother Earth. She confesses that "were there to come a day when I become a believer, I would place my faith in an entity like the Mother Earth" (*Written on Water* 89). She goes on to distinguish between the male and female characteristics and credit the divine nature of the Mother Earth to all women:

> The superman is male, but divinity has something female about it, because a superman and a god are not the same thing. The superman is an

> aggressive creature whose very being implies a reason for being, a goal. The divine, on the other hand, signifies all-encompassing compassion, limitless sorrow, perfect understanding, serenity. (*Written on Water* 88)

Rather than a distant and aloof being, the Mother Earth, the representative of the godliness of women, is divine in that she is engaged in real life, soothing all the pains, frustrations and suffering of human beings with mercy and sympathy, the characteristics that lie in the nature of Ah Xiao. As Shui Jing has noticed, Ah Xiao has the "ubiquitous" (*Zhang Ailing Weiwan* 73) concerns for anyone who has even the slightest connection to her, and her universal care and compassion for people around her really embody the quintessence of the Mother Earth.

The ubiquity of her attentiveness makes Ah Xiao rarely ignore the needs of her friends. To find them employment is one of her achievements. "Xiuqin, the Blonde's amah, was a younger friend of hers; it was Ah Xiao who had asked Mr. Garter to recommend her." Another friend of hers, who "carried rice and did temporary work," with Ah Xiao's help, gets "a job doing the laundry for a family on the next floor" (trans. by Simon Patton, in *Traces of Love* 67, 74). When Xiuqin is distressed because she is forced to leave Shanghai and go home for an arranged marriage, she goes to Ah Xiao for consultation:

> Xiuqin hadn't said a word for a long time. When Ah Xiao turned around, she found her leaning against the door, biting on a finger and deep in thought. Ah Xiao then remembered that the family of her husband-to-be wanted them to be married. Her mother had come to take her back to the country but she didn't want to go. She asked: 'Is your mother still in Shanghai?' Xiuqin responded with a rush of intimacy: 'Oh, Sis. I can't

> bear it!' She was on the verge of weeping. Her gentle eyes, red and moist with tears, looked exactly like lips.
>
> Ah Xiao said: 'I think you'll have to go back. Otherwise, people will gossip. "Such a grown-up girl," they'll say, "she must be up to something in Shanghai".' Xiuqin replied: "That's what Mother says!"
>
> She asked Xiuqin to stay and eat with them; in addition, two guests turned up [...].
>
> [...] As she fried the food, the elderly woman began questioning Xiuqin about the preparations for her dowry. Xiuqin smiled but could hardly get a word out, blushing like a bride. Ah Xiao answered every question on her behalf. (*Traces of Love* 72-74)

Ah Xiao is solicitous in helping Xiuqin to dissipate her worries. The tone with which she speaks to Xiuqin resembles that of a mother, or of a mentor, who points out the possible rumours she might be confronted with had she insisted on staying in Shanghai. She kindly asks Xiuqin to have lunch with her. It is a generous invitation because "in times such as these, Ah Xiao didn't often invite guests to stay for lunch with such warmth. She liked to put up a good front" (*Traces of Love* 74). It is implied that at such deprived times people often begrudge their friends even a lunch, while Ah Xiao still enjoys treating a girl who is nearly overwhelmed with her impending marriage. Moreover, when the questions from other guests disconsole Xiuqin, Ah Xiao replies on her behalf, under the consideration that she might feel embarrassed.

The topic of the conversation then changes. Ah Xiao pokes her nose into the business of the newlyweds living upstairs:

> The short-term worker asked, 'That couple that's just moved into the upstairs apartment in your building—are they newly-weds too?' Ah Xiao replied: 'Ah-hah. They bought that apartment for 1.5 million. His family's got money. So does hers. They put on a real show! The apartment, the furniture, several dozen sets of bedding, as well as ten piculs of rice and the same amount of coal! I don't know where they're going to find space for everything in an apartment like that! Four servants accompanied the bride: a male and female domestic, a cook and a trishaw-puller.'[…] Ah Xiao began to cheer up [...].
>
> The short-term worker then asked: 'How many days have they been married?' Ah Xiao replied: 'About three altogether, I think.' The elderly woman asked: 'And was it a new-style wedding or an old-style one?' Ah Xiao answered: 'New style, of course. But there was also a trousseau: I saw them carrying box after box up the stairs.' Xiuqin chimed in with a question of her own: 'Is the bride pretty?' Ah Xiao replied: 'I haven't actually seen the bride. They don't go out at all and things upstairs are always quiet. I never hear a peep out of them.' The short-term worker commented: 'I saw her when they came to inspect the apartment. She was quite fat and wore glasses.' As if jumping to her defence, Ah Xiao replied with annoyance: 'Perhaps that wasn't the bride you saw after all.' (*Traces of Love* 74-75)

Ah Xiao enumerates the valuables of the newlyweds as if she is the housekeeper of the couple. She is indulged in the trifles of daily life and shows her unquenchable curiosity about people around her. But she learns to appreciate the wealth and social position of her neighbor, rather than making an issue of their extravagance and sumptuousness. Besides, her benevolence is also called into play when she counters the negative gossip about the bride's appearance. Ah Xiao is officious but warm-hearted. As Shui Jing points out, she is eager to manage public affairs in order to maintain the order and morals in society (*Zhang Ailing Weiwan* 73). Her language is unrefined but charged with kind intentions and her ideology modeled by her discourses is equal to her image as a Mother Earth.

Ah Xiao is a mother figure to her friends, and a real mother to her son, Baishun 百順. During the whole story, we see Ah Xiao chattering on and on about Baishun's behavior:

> 'Baishun! Where's that child got to now? This is no time to think about playing. Come and have your breakfast and then get yourself off to school!' she scolded. Her beautiful, bony face was as stern as a step-mother's when she was angry [...]. He sat down on the barrel, put his cup and his plate on the bench and waited quietly. From a crockery jar on top of the refrigerator, Ah Xiao took out half a loaf of leftover bread and said, 'Here! Take this! Eat it all up if you can! It'd be nice to leave some for somebody else. No one would ever guess that a mite like you could eat more than a grown-up!'
>
> There was a blue glass on the sill. She took the toothbrush out of it, filled it with water from the thermos flask, and handed it to Baishun, then

> continued her harangue: 'You expected me to do everything for you! How much are you paying me a month to be your servant? I don't know what I owed you in my last life to deserve this! Hurry up now, it's time to get going.'(*Traces of Love* 61-62)

When talking to her son, Ah Xiao's discourse is always anxious and impatient. Her reproaches on Baishun, however, serve to inform the readers of the boy's defects: always thinking about playing, he thus saps his spirit by seeking pleasure, and eating "more than a grown-up," he is hence quite greedy (J. Zhang, *Zhang Ailing Xinlun* 64). For Ah Xiao, to be stern to her son is to discipline him and help him grow up as a well-learned and successful man. Therefore, her scolding discloses the worries and concerns of a responsible mother.

Baishun, on the contrary, does not live up to her expectations. Not diligent in his studies, he even looks unmannerly. When Ah Xiao introduces her son to other amahs, she blushes "as she turned to her friends as if she owned them an apology: 'He looks like a little tramp, doesn't he'" (*Traces of Love* 74)? Having lunch with Ah Xiao and her friends, Baishun cannot curb his cravings for the better cuisines other people have. His childish wishes, however, soon provoke Ah Xiao:

> Baishun said: 'Mum, the people opposite are having dried vegetables and roast meat today.' Ah Xiao put her chopsticks together and hit him with the thick ends, scolding: 'If they eat so well, why don't you go and join them? Well, why don't you? Huh? Why don't you?' Baishun blinked but did not cry, the others all doing their best to console him [...].
>
> The elderly woman asked Baishun: 'Don't you have to go back to school

> after lunch?' Ah Xiao explained: 'It's Saturday today.' She turned around and grabbed a hold of Baishun: 'Come Saturday and you vanish as soon as I let you out the door. You sit here quietly and do your revision for a couple of hours before you go out and play' [...].
>
> [...] Xiuqin laughed and said: 'Baishun had a good voice. Why don't you send him off to study story-telling, Sister? He could earn a lot of money.' Ah Xiao was speechless for a moment. She blushed, laughed weakly and said: 'He wouldn't be any good at that, would he? He's still got a way to go before he finishes primary school. Although he's not much of a student, I'd still like him to do well at school and have a good future.' Xiuqin replied: 'What grade's he in?' Ah Xiao said: 'Only the third. He repeated a year. It's embarrassing!' (*Traces of Love* 76-77)

As Ah Xiao reserves no scolds on Baishun in front of her friends, it is other amahs who try to alleviate her anger. However, when Xiuqin admires Baishun's voice and suggests that he might be good at story-telling, Ah Xiao becomes "speechless for a moment" and reveals her hope that her son could "do well at school and have a good future." The harsh and gentle tones respectively imbedded in the discourses of Ah Xiao and Xiuqin make manifest Ah Xiao's real intention behind her chiding: though she realizes her son is inept in school, she still nourishes the dream of Baishun being successful in the future due to his intellectual capacity. Ah Xiao's disappointment at Baishun's idleness, nevertheless, does not drown the simple and mundane expectation of a mother.

Following her demands, Baishun starts to read the words from his textbook:

> Baishun sat on the biscuit barrel, his book propped against a bench, rocking from side to side as he read in a sing-song voice: 'I want to grow up big and strong, big and strong! Mummy and daddy say I'm a good boy, a good boy!' Even before he had read a couple of sentences he asked: 'Mummy, after I've read for two hours I'll go out and play. Mummy, what time is it now?'(*Traces of Love* 76)

As he wags his body from side to side, his careless and casual attitude seems to erode the credibility of all these promises in the textbook. The promises of growing up big and strong and of being a good boy become only an illusion. Baishun remains ignorant to his mother's expectation. He is completely unaware of Ah Xiao's worries and only thinks of playing after two hours of studying. Both sticking to their own concerns without any interaction, Ah Xiao and Baishun are placed in the situation of incommunicability.

Ah Xiao lives with her husband out of wedlock, but, as the narrator tells, "all these years she had regretted her decision to move in with him without going through all the excitement of a wedding" (*Traces of Love* 73). Since her husband, a tailor, "lived in his shop," "the couple rarely had a chance to be together. This made them extremely affectionate toward one another" (*Traces of Love* 78). However, Ah Xiao still feels the sorrow of a widow and laments that "although she had a husband, it wasn't much different from being on her own: she had to rely on herself" (*Traces of Love* 77). The following passage displays two themes: the interaction between Ah Xiao and her husband and the thoughts grumbling in her mind. It gives a silhouette of Ah Xiao's discontent with their relationship:

> She told him about Xiuqin's marriage, about how she wouldn't marry

> without a gold ring, about her extravagance. He would punctuate her remarks with the occasional 'Mmm,' his cagey black pupils gazing into his tea and his smile very understanding, sympathetic. This hurt her; it also made her angry. The worry was all hers, it seemed. It didn't make much difference to a man whether he got married or not. At the same time she also felt bored by the whole affair. Their child was a big boy now, so what use was there thinking about such things? It was true he wasn't supporting her, but he probably wouldn't have been able to support her even if they had been legally married. What powers had chosen this life of drudgery for her? He only made enough to cover his own expenses. Sometimes he even asked her for money to pay into his savings club. (*Traces of Love* 78-79)

Like Mrs. Lou who never expresses her dissatisfactions with her husband, Ah Xiao could only repine at her inauthentic matrimony in her mind and finally all the complaints become the pains and regrets of her own.

It is worth noting that the tailor is described as remaining almost silent in the dialogue, merely replying to Ah Xiao's detailed reports of Xiuqin's marriage with a short and perfunctory nasal sound. He is either not interested in or ignorant of Ah Xiao's words. As a result, he also fails to discern the significant notion behind Xiuqin's story. It is Ah Xiao's yearning for the vanity of a splendid wedding and her wishes that her husband could be more responsible and save her from the toil of supporting a family that count more than the issue of her friend's marriage. His silence, however, arouses Ah Xiao's anger as she thinks she has detected from his face the smile of comprehension and compassion. It hurts Ah Xiao when she takes her husband's smile as his sympathy for her friend whereas he could not even tell the bitterness she is unwilling and unable to convey.

Ah Xiao's strict moral code is delineated through her comments on the life of Garter:

> Ah Xiao said: 'I should do this tub of washing while there's still water. Sit down and rest a moment, Sister. To think there are such infatuated women in this world!' she said, still thinking of Miss Li as she bent over kneading the wet clothes, and panting as she spoke. 'Why should she take a fancy to him? The man is pettier than ten women put together. The Mrs. next door was given an extra ration-ticket for bread and so gave it to me to buy a loaf. But he thought it was his. You should have seen the way he stared at it. Even if I had to steal, I wouldn't steal from him! There are some leftovers from last week but if he won't come out and say he doesn't want them I'm not going to touch anything that belongs to him. He says: 'Shanghai is a terrible place! Even the Chinese servants cheat foreigners!' But if he wasn't in Shanghai, he would have been killed off long ago in the foreigner's own war. It was like this last time. He filled the bathtub with clothes and left them to soak, afraid I wasn't going to wash them. The color of the shirts ran, making a real mess, but he never said a word about it. I think he's getting cheaper and cheaper. This woman he's seeing tonight…It's no wonder he catches those diseases! In the last couple of months he's had these sores like boils all over his head and face. He's much better now, but that medicine he was using made a mess of the sheets. (*Traces of Love* 71-72)

The gossip about Garter, one the one hand, reveals Ah Xiao's revolt against his promiscuous relations with women, and, on the other, portrays the image of a miserly playboy who will even begrudge his maid a ration-ticket for bread. In this dialogue with Xiuqin, only Ah Xiao's voice is heard, while Garter's life is projected by her criticism of him. Thus, although Garter is absent here, his ideology is still presented as being in conflict with that of Ah Xiao. Ah Xiao's account of his indecent behavior makes Garter inferior to her with regard to their ethics. His superior social status as a foreigner and an employer has been downgraded in his maid's discourse as a lowly, sordid man cheapened by the venereal disease that infects him because of his unrestrained lechery.

Garter's discourse makes his image as a womanizer even more impressive. Awakened by a phone call from one of his girlfriends in the morning, he is quite annoyed:

> Ah Xiao picked up the receiver and spoke into it in sharp, self-important English, 'Hel-lo. Ye-s Mis-s. Plea-se wai-t a mo-ment.' She had not heard this woman's voice before. Another new one. She went and knocked on his door: 'Telephone, Sir!'
>
> Her employer was already washed, groomed and dressed. He looked distinctly annoyed with her [...]. Nevertheless, Mr. Garter still passed for a handsome man. There was something extremely artful about his grey eyes, and he carried himself with aplomb. He walked over to the telephone and cleared his throat before answering it, but a slight hoarseness remained. After an interrogative 'Hello?' he immediately dropped his voice to a whisper that conveyed mingled surprise and delight: '*Oh, hello!*' Beside himself with joy, this was the same as saying, 'Could it be true? Is that really you?' Even after rising so early he still knew how to turn on the

> charm. (*Traces of Love* 62-63)

The narrative voice works together with Garter's words to accomplish Garter's profile as an expert philanderer. Stephen Cheng remarks that "his charming 'hello' is intended for any woman who happens to be on the other end of the telephone" ("Themes and Techniques in Eileen Chang's Stories"176). The narrator's note of his ecstasy after saying hello not only indicates the swift shift of his mood from impatience to passion but also emphasizes the flirtatious tone lurking in this conversation.

But then the focus of the narration spotlights the mind of Ah Xiao again, divulging her disdain for Garter:

> Ah Xiao, on the other hand, had heard this seductive *Oh, hello*! countless times before and so withdrew into the kitchen. Yesterday the Blonde had thrown a party. Afterward she had presumably accompanied him back here—there were two unwashed wineglasses in the kitchen, one kissed with lipstick. What time she had left was anybody's guess. None of his women actually ever stayed the night. After she had left, he'd gone back into the kitchen and eaten a raw egg. Ah Xiao had noticed the intact egg-shell in the western style rubbish tin. After picking a small hole in it, he had sucked out its contents. Ah Xiao shook her head. He was nothing but a savage! (*Traces of Love* 63)

The narration follows Ah Xiao's eyes and her thought to examine the dissolute side of Garter's life. The stained wineglasses inform Ah Xiao that Garter slept with the blonde woman last night, and early this morning he can still dally about with another one over the telephone with fervor. The savage manner of eating a raw egg reflects the wild and uncontrolled lust of Garter. Once again, Grater is invisible in this narration, but Ah Xiao's response to her employer's wanton and animalistic lifestyle allow the readers to identify the ideology that Garter adopts. He is "an extremist in that love for him has been reduced only to a carnal aspect," and "debauchery being his daily routine, he becomes increasingly indiscriminate in his choice of sexual prey." In conclusion, Grater "indulges himself with neither restraint nor moderation. All his affairs, lacking in excitement even to himself, become merely travesties of love" (Cheng, "Themes and Techniques in Eileen Chang's Stories" 175-177).

Shui Jing makes a more harsh judgment on Garter as he thinks Garter is actually a "gigolo" (*Zhang Ailing Weiwan* 77). In the following paragraph, Garter is mute as usual. Instead, the narrator explains for him the commercial law he abides by when pursuing women and love:

> He himself was a mature beauty, and had become more and more economical with time and money as he grew older. Moreover, it was now clear to him that women were all more or less the same. He had always believed in making relationships with women of good families, or with ladies of the *demi-monde* in search of a little romance outside working hours. He didn't expect them to rob the rich for his benefit; all he wanted was an equitable exchange. He knew that 'long-term gamblers had to lose, just as long-term lovers had their blues.' At the gaming table he always checked to see which way the wind was blowing and, if things were favourable, took advantage of the situation to make a bit of a profit. But he always knew when to stop. (*Traces of Love* 71)

As Garter becomes more "economical with time (he never spends the whole night with his customers) and money (definitely the women will pay him)," for him, "women were all more or less the same (this sentence proves that Garter is Mr. Camellia, the so-called 'gigolo' in Cantonese)" (Shui Jing, *Zhang Ailing Weiwan* 77). Garter is very calculative about womanizing. Therefore, he compares the game of hunting for a lover to that of gambling. All he wants is small benefits and then he will disengage from flirtation before it is about to jeopardize his interests.

Though Ah Xiao despises Garter's debauchery, her enthusiastic temperament still presents itself when it is required. Garter plans to treat his new girlfriend to dinner while Ah Xiao reminds him that they are short of flour, thus unable to make the requested pancake. Garter, caring nothing about the quality of food, decides to make pancakes without flour, but "Ah Xiao had never in her life heard of anyone serving up sweetened egg" (*Traces of Love* 65). Finally, "in a moment of weakness, she relented and used some of her own rationed flour to make pancakes for him" (*Traces of Love* 85). Her generosity at the "moment of weakness" further sets off the miserly character of Garter who once "glanced down at her son's leftover bread" (*Traces of Love* 64), suspecting Ah Xiao had stolen his ration ticket. Moreover, Ah Xiao lies to Miss Li on the telephone that Garter is not at home, in order that he will not offend both Miss Li and the woman he is flirting with in his room.

Miss Li, however, could not even let go of a maid, and starts talking to Ah Xiao about Garter's bed sheet:

> She had noticed last time she called that the fitted sheet on Garter's bed needed mending. Seeing he was a bachelor and had no one to take care of him, she was thinking of making him a new one. At this point, Ah Xiao began to find Miss Li's fussiness somewhat repellent and she rose to her

> employer's defence: 'Oh, he's been planning to get a new one for some time. When he bought the apartment, the bed came with it, but it has never been very suitable. All along he's been thinking of buying a bigger one. If you make a cover for this bed, it will be the wrong size. I recently mended it for him and it looks fine now.' She suddenly felt a motherly protectiveness towards Garter that was both firm and ferocious. (*Traces of Love* 83)

While speaking to Miss Li, Ah Xiao is not only a maid. She is rather like "the mother or the elder sister" of Garter (J. Zhang, *Zhang Ailing Xinlun* 67). She explains away the shabby bed sheet in order to save the smart and dandyish camouflage Garter wears in front of women. "At this moment, in Ah Xiao's mind, Garter is not different from Baishun. To take an objective point of view, when we evaluate their moral integrity, Garter is indeed like a child" (Shui Jing, *Zhang Ailing de Xiaoshuo Yishu* 81-82).

However, Ah Xiao's labor of protecting her employer is all in vain. Miss Li overhears Garter's voice. He cannot avoid her anymore but tries to beg her off:

> On his guard, he asked: 'Hello....Yes, I've been extremely busy these last few days....Now don't be silly. It's not like that.' There was no explosion on the other end of the line. Even her sobbing was concealed by an intake of breath. He relaxed, and repeated gaily in low voice: 'Don't be silly....How are you, anyway?' Twittering on like this was best just in case the other woman was listening in. 'I've already had him buy those shares for you. See how lucky you are! Have you had one of your headaches recently? And how have you been sleeping? ...' He blew into the telephone

> twice, making her ears tickle terribly. Perhaps in the past he had often playfully blown into her ears like this. Both of them appeared to be reliving the sweet experiences of days gone by. There was a loud laughter. Then he continued: 'Well, when can I see you?' At the mention of a meeting, he became very businesslike; his tone instantly stiffening, intent on precision. 'What about Friday?...How about this: come over to my place first, then we'll decide.'...He said: 'So...until Friday!' with a hint of a sigh, and then urged: 'Take care. Bye-bye, my sweet!' The last phrase sounded like a gentle kiss. (*Traces of Love* 83-84)

Garter tries to ease Miss Li's worry about their less frequent rendezvous with the excuse of being busy. Then he starts to flirt with her by blowing into the telephone, pretending to be concerned about her health, and making plans for their next date. Finally, the "last phrase" that "sounded like a gentle kiss" helps him dismiss an infatuated woman in a romantic way. The dialogue between Garter and Miss Li gives a vivid portrayal of Garter's image as a professional womanizer.

After the flirtation on the telephone, Garter goes out with the blonde woman and returns around midnight. Going to the kitchen to fetch some iced water, he catches Ah Xiao and her son sleeping on the kitchen table:

> As soon as the electric light was switched on, it shone directly onto the large kitchen table [...]. Ah Xiao woke up, but made out she was still asleep. She was only wearing a singlet and a pair of striped drawers. She lay on her side facing away from the door, her short, thin arms and legs pressed frog-like against Baishun. The two flies left her head and buzzed against the light globe with a tinkling sound. Garter looked her over. In the

> light of day, this amah was actually extremely pretty and quite charming, but in her underwear she wasn't really much to look at. This thought consoled him because he had never had any intention of getting involved with her: having an affair with a woman from the serving classes would have given her ideas above her station—a most unwise thing to do. Moreover, in extraordinary times such as these, competent servants were difficult to find, while there were plenty of women available for the taking. (*Traces of Love* 89-90)

The narrator follows Garter's eyes to review Ah Xiao's body and finds the "frog-like" arms and legs quite unattractive. Then, the narrative voice discloses the selfish reason by which Garter is refrained from seducing his maid. On the one hand, he is disenchanted when Ah Xiao takes off her daytime decoration. More decisively, on the other, Garter thinks that a quality servant is hard to find, whereas "the supply of women glutted the market" (Cheng, "Themes and Techniques in Eileen Chang's Stories" 176). To dally about a maid simply does not benefit him. For Garter, women are just gullible sponsors, while "competent servants" are precious products.

Garter shows no consideration for morals. In his world, everything is under the evaluation of mercantile interests or carnal pleasures. On the contrary, it behooves Ah Xiao to exert her ubiquitous concerns to help people around her, and the request for reward hardly comes into her mind. Her ideology is at odds with that of Garter. Ah Xiao is "a woman particularly fastidious about cleanliness" (Cheng, "Themes and Techniques in Eileen Chang's Stories" 181). However, the flies that buzz against the light globe, according to Shui Jing, symbolize the dirty and nasty world Garter belongs to (*Zhang Ailing de Xiaoshuo Yishu* 81), which keeps pestering and assailing her. "Like everything in her sordid and seamy surrounding, they cannot be swept away, much to her vexation" (Cheng, "Themes and Techniques in Eileen Chang's Stories" 181). As a result, engulfed in the immoral world of Garter, she can neither escape nor fight back.

At the end of the story, Ah Xiao hangs out the washing to dry on the balcony, while taking a look downstairs:

> She noticed the chair in which the young master had sat when enjoying the breeze of the previous evening. It had been left outside.
>
> Enjoying the evening breeze now seemed to belong to the distant past. That brown lacquer chair rested unsteadily and creaked as it rocked in the wind as if your average Chinese still sat there on it. On the ground beneath it there were the shells of water chestnuts and peanuts, together with the rinds and pith of persimmons. The tabloid newspaper had been blown by the wind into the guttering, where it remained, sucked firmly against the cement railing by the air. Ah Xiao glanced down and thought to herself with unconcern that there would always be people like that making a mess. Fortunately, however, it was none of her business. (*Traces of Love* 91)

The balcony downstairs is scattered with "shells of water chestnuts, and peanuts, together with the rinds and pith of persimmons." Another image of a dirty world appears when the story is about to come to an end, confirming that Ah Xiao is still imprisoned "in a world of corrupt morality, debauchery and filth" (Shui Jing, *Zhang Ailing de Xiaoshuo Yishu* 79). Moreover, it reinforces the incompatibility between Ah Xiao and her employer.

However, reading Ah Xiao's mind, we can only hear her saying that the mess is actually "none of her business." The ubiquitous love of the Mother Earth is replaced by the selfish mentality of a maid. As Shui Jing points out, the incongruous character of Ah Xiao is foreshadowed at the beginning of the story where the world is described to matter " the slightest to God, being of no more importance than a gust of wind" and "even the sky [...] had turned its face away" (*Traces of Love* 59). He comments that in a world abandoned by God, "the influence of the Mother Earth is next to nothing." Ah Xiao is "the Mother Earth living in modern fiction. She is but a human being, like Xiuqin and Miss Li [...]. Her consolation works even less effectively than the song from a street vendor in the late night" (*Zhang Ailing Weiwan* 80). In a world unattended by God and smeared by rampant lust, the power of Ah Xiao's benevolence and morality is limited.

The story begins with the words of Zhang's friend, Fatima Mohideen: "Autumn is a song. On nights of 'steamed osmanthus flower' it is like a flute melody played in a kitchen. In the daytime, it is a song sung by small children: ardent and familiar and clear and moist" (*Traces of Love* 59). According to Eva Hung, "the fragrance of the osmanthus flower is synonymous with autumn. 'Steamed' refers both to the heat and the humidity of an oppressive Indian summer" (*Traces of Love* 59). The protagonist, Ah Xiao, is confined in a world of oppressive heat and ambient humidity, but "in this world of scorching steam, she is like the osmanthus flower" (J. Zhang, *Zhang Ailing Xinlun* 68), emitting its own fragrance. There is an irreconcilable quality between the balmy osmanthus blossom and the hot and moist world that surrounds it (J. Zhang, *Zhang Ailing Xinlun* 61). However, it is the irreconcilability that points out the clashes between Ah Xiao and the people around her. Ah Xiao, the representative of the fresh osmanthus flower, is steamed in a world of squalor and corruption. The conflict and incommunicability between Ah Xiao and her husband, between Ah Xiao and Baishun, and between Ah Xiao and Garter make conspicuous the mismatch between the fragrant osmanthus flower and the Indian summer of suffocating and oppressive heat alluded to at the beginning of the story.

As Shui Jing remarks, the story is "a slice of life" of a Shanghai maid. It is not dramatic at all. Nor is there any obvious progress of plot (*Zhang Ailing Weiwan* 67). The story focuses on the portrayal of interweaved but disharmonious relationships among people. It is furnished with the exuberance of different discourses of a Shanghai maid and other amahs, of the concupiscent foreigner and his girlfriends, and of the boy never diligent in study and the tailor fumbling for the words to express himself. The diversity of languages evinces the diversity of perspectives of different characters. In addition, the narrative voice also functions to speak on behalf of the characters and to show forth the discontent they fail to express in their conversations. Stephen Cheng labels the narrative technique of this story "the concealed narrator," the narrator that "plunges into the consciousness of the characters" and "possesses several centers of intelligence instead of only one" ("Themes and Techniques in Eileen Chang's Stories" 189). With the narrative voice shuttling in and out of the consciousnesses of Ah Xiao, Baishun, Garter and the tailor, Zhang makes the story a stage of heteroglossia where different ideologies of the characters meet and compete with each other. The consequence is that the petty but irreconcilable struggles among characters confront Ah Xiao, the "steamed osmanthus flower," with an "unhappy autumn."

### 4. Ideologies and Heteroglossia in "Love in a Fallen City"

The structure of "Love in a Fallen City," as Leo Ou-fan Lee has noticed, marks the "tale of two cities," Shanghai and Hong Kong (303). It is in these two cities that the female protagonist, Bai Liusu, is in battle with two kinds of ideologies antagonistic to hers. The first war "Liusu is involved in happens at the household of the Bai family in Shanghai. She has to endure the sarcasms and sneers from her family and to face the fact that 'in the whole family there is no one she can turn to'" (Mei 263). The Bai family represents "a formerly prominent, extended family in decay" (Gunn 318). Liusu, the sixth sister in her family, is a divorcee living with her brothers and sisters-in-law. Her relatives, though taking her in when she is driven away by her husband's violence, actually consider her to be a parasite and, after they have squandered her money, grow more and more impatient with her. The story begins with the news about the death of Liusu's ex-husband. The Bai family wants her to move back in order to keep vigil over the large inheritance, which is actually in opposition to Liusu's wish. Her brother, the Third Master, advises her to stay there whatever it costs because such a big family like his will not let her starve:

> Bai Liusu laughed sarcastically and said, "Third Brother's plans for me are very thorough indeed, but unfortunately it's a bit too late. The divorce went through some seven or eight years ago. According to you, those legal proceedings were just for show. But the law isn't something to fool around with!"
>
> "Don't you try to scare us with the law," the Third Master warned. "The law is one thing today and another tomorrow, but what I'm talking about is the law of family relations, and *that* never changes! As long as you live you belong to his family, and after you die your ghost will belong to them too!" [...].
>
> Liusu stood up. "Why didn't you say all this seven or eight years ago?!"

> "I was afraid you'd be upset and think that we weren't willing to take you in."
>
> Liusu gasped. "But now you're not afraid of upsetting me? Now that you've spent all my money, you're not afraid of upsetting me?!"
>
> "I spent your money?!" Third Master confronted her full-face. "I spent your few paltry coins? You live in our house, and everything you eat and drink comes out of our pockets. Sure, in the past, it didn't much matter. Adding one more person then just meant putting one more pair of chopsticks on the table. But these days, well, just go and ask for yourself—what does rice cost now? I didn't mention money, but you had to bring it up!" (trans. by Karen Kingsbury 62)

The domestic scene turns into a battle in which Liusu has to defend herself against her family's malicious discourse. The Third Master, initially, is trying to persuade her to submit to her husband's household, totally regardless of her dignity. Then, obviously irritated by the issue of money, he starts to insult Liusu by accusing her of the Bai Family's decline.

Soon the sister-in-law also joins the quarrel against Liusu:

> Fourth Mistress, who was standing behind Third Master, laughed. "They say you shouldn't talk about money with your own flesh and blood. Once you start the money-talk, there's quite a lot to say! I've been telling Fourth Master for quite a while now. I've been telling him, 'Old Four, you'd

> better warn Third Master. When you two are dealing in gold and stocks, you shouldn't use Six Sister's money. It will bring you bad luck! As soon as she married into her husband's family, he started losing all their money. Then she came back here, and now her family, as everyone can see, has lost all its money. A real bad-luck comet, that one!"
>
> Third Master said, "Fourth Mistress is right! If we hadn't let her into those stock deals, we never would have lost all our property!" ("Love in a Fallen City" 62-63)

The whole Bai family represents the ideology of people who are avaricious, "extremely selfish and snobbish." "The Third Master, Fourth Master, and the sisters-in-law of Bai Liusu are all greedy, corrupt, and narrow-minded. They are nobodies, but still love to give themselves airs as if they are the members of the aristocracy" (Fei 256, 242). The discourse within the Bai family demonstrates their contemptible characters, against which the forlorn image of Liusu is silhouetted.

Confronted with these acrid remarks, Liusu becomes a helpless divorcee who can only fight back by degrading herself and accepting her role as a jinx. Thus, she utters a curse on the Bai Family. "Liusu had now reached the height of fury, but she simply laughed and said, 'Yes, yes, everything is my fault. You're poverty-stricken? It's because I've eaten you out of your house and home. You've lost your money? It must be that I've led you on. Your sons die? Of course it's because I've brought evil into your lives'" ("Love in a Fallen City" 63). In a quarrel like this, the verbal attacks hurt people no less than real weapons. Liusu's words exasperate the Fourth Mistress, who then "grabbed her son's collar and rammed his head into Liusu, shouting, 'Cursing the children now! After what you've said, if my son dies, I'll come looking for you!'" ("Love in a Fallen City" 63).

However, Liusu's counterattack is too weak to become a deathblow. The Fourth Mistress continues her assault by making fun of Liusu's divorce when she talks to Seventh Sister:

> "I say, Seventh Sister, when you have in-laws, you should be a little careful. Don't feel that you can make trouble wherever you like. Is divorce such an easy thing, that you can get divorced anytime you want? If it were really that easy, why haven't I divorced your Fourth Brother, since he's never amounted to much! I too have my own family, it's not as if I don't have a place to run to. But in times like these I have to think of their needs too. I've got a conscience, and I have to think of them—can't weight them down and drive them into poverty. I still have some sense of shame!" ("Love in a Fallen City" 64)

The words of the Fourth Mistress drop a hint about Liusu being shameless and selfish, that she never thinks on behalf of her family and her presence only brings poverty to the Bai family. The attack is so fierce and callous that Liusu finally collapses. "Bai Liusu was kneeling forlornly by her mother's bed [...]. 'I can't live in this house any longer,' she whispered. 'I just can't'" ( "Love in a Fallen City" 64). The clashes between Liusu and the Bai family are portrayed through a series of severe and drastic dialogic battles, in which Liusu is defeated.

But Liusu still exacts revenge when she steals Fan Liuyuan from the Seventh Sister. It is the first time she feels triumphant over the Bai family. The Fourth Mistress, especially irritated, "turned to face Liusu's room and shouted, '[...] why shouldn't I curse her? It's not as if she hadn't seen a man for a thousand years! So why does she, the minute she catches a whiff of one, just let herself go completely, panting and fainting and simply going crazy!'" ("Love in a Fallen City" 68-69). However, Liusu is not infuriated:

> Liusu squatted in the dark and lit a stick of mosquito incense. She had heard every word that was spoken out on the balcony, but this time she was perfectly calm [...].
>
> She hadn't planned this night's events, but, in any case, she had given them quite a show. Did they think that she was already finished, her life over? It was still early in the game. She smiled. ("Love in a Fallen City" 69-70)

The narrative voice describes how Liusu's emotion changes. No longer the humiliated divorcee, she celebrates her victory with composure and imperturbable self-possession. Her mind reads the confidence and expectation for future prospects, which is based on her relationship with Liuyuan, a man who has totally different ideas about life and love than her. The conflict between Liusu and Liuyuan becomes the second set of contrary ideologies in this story.

Liuyuan is the child of a concubine his father associated with in England. But his mother is so afraid of the legitimate wife's vengeance that she never claims for him the position and property he deserves. Liuyuan, drifting alone for many years overseas, finally receives an inheritance after his parents die. However, "due to the emotional upsets he had suffered in his youth, bit by bit he became a playboy, gambling and feasting and visiting prostitutes. The only pleasure he denied himself was married bliss" ( "Love in a Fallen City" 67). Taking a romantic but irresponsible attitude toward love, Liuyuan would rather enjoy flirtation than marriage. In her essay "A Confession about 'Love in a Fallen City,'" Zhang gives her comments on the character Fan Liuyuan. "There is no tradition to affirm his beliefs. Thus, the ideals he is convinced of in his youth can not deal with challenges and finally end in disillusionment. For the rest of his life, he escapes from the reality and hides himself in a shell, living an empty and debauched life" (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 15,* 103). Being "a cynical playboy," Liuyuan "is not likely to swear eternal vows of love and devotion" (Lee 300). On the contrary, the rivalry between Liusu and the Bai family urges her to stake her life on the marriage with Liuyuan, an ideal candidate for a husband the Bai family covets. Moreover, marriage is a promise of life-long financial support for Liusu. Therefore, "with her determination towards getting married, Liusu has to participate in the complicated flirting games Liuyuan plays" (Fei 245).

"In Hong Kong, Liusu and Liuyuan embark on a long journey in which they jockey for their own goals" (Fei 245). According to Mei Jialing, Hong Kong as the city where Liusu and Liuyuan establish their relationship is also the invisible city located in their hearts:

> It is the psychological fortresses they build respectively out of their own calculations, each trying to cheat or outperform the other. If they stay in their own fortresses, they might remain distant from each other, and make sure they are safe and secure. However, they will never reveal their true selves. If they leave the fortresses, though they might demonstrate sincerity to each other, there is also the risk that one of them would become the prey of the other, and finally will be abandoned like a pair of worn-out shoes. (261)

The divergence between Liusu and Liuyuan lies on the fact that "he wants her merely as a mistress, a position he knows Tassel [Liusu] will not condescend to [...]. Equally cunning and calculating at playing the game of love, Tassel refuses to do so in the hope for a better bargaining position for the future" (Cheng, "Themes and Techniques in Eileen Chang's Stories" 173). The dialogue between Liusu and Liuyuan is an oral battle in which one of them wants to persuade the other with their own ideologies. Moreover, "because Fan and Bai have different expectations for love and marriage, the difference thus gives rise to a variety of psychological battles between a man and a woman" (Mei 263).

While staying in the Repulse Bay Hotel, one day, Liusu and Liuyuan go out for dinner together:

> When they finished eating, Liuyuan raised his glass and drained the remaining tea, then lifted the glass high and stared into it.
>
> "If there's something worth seeing, let me have a look," said Liusu.
>
> "Hold it up to the light," said Liuyuan. "the scene inside reminds me of the forests of Malaya."
>
> Through the dusky green glass, Liusu suddenly saw him watching her with eyes that seemed to laugh and yet didn't laugh. She put the glass down and smiled.
>
> "I'll take you to Malaya," Liuyuan said.

"What for?"

"To return to nature." He thought for a moment. "But there's just one problem—I can't imagine you running through the forest in a cheongsam. But neither can I imagine you not wearing a cheongsam."

Liusu's face stiffened. "Stop talking nonsense."

"But I'm serious. The first time I saw you, I thought that you shouldn't bare your arms in this kind of trendy tunic, but neither should you wear Western-style clothes. A Manchu-style dress might suit you better, but its lines are too severe."

"In the end, if a person is ugly, then no matter how she dresses it still won't look right!"

Liuyuan laughed. "You keep turning my words around. What I mean is that you're like someone from another world. You have all these little gestures, and a romantic aura, very much like a Peking opera singer."

Liusu raised her eyebrows. "An opera singer indeed!" she said sarcastically, "But of course it takes more than one to put on a show, and I've been forced into it. A person acts clever with me, and if I don't do the same, he takes me for a fool and insults me."

When Liuyuan heard this, he was rather crest-fallen. ("Love in a Fallen

City" 79-80)

Liuyuan's words are arbitrary and imaginative. His mind is always brimming with seductive fantasies, which trigger his whimsical plan of escaping from the civilization of Shanghai and Hong Kong, returning to the nature of Malaya, the primitive environment that may disarm Liusu and evoke her natural desires. However, Liusu's replies are rather rigid and discouraging. Not overwhelmed by Liuyuan's visionary reveries, instead, she is irritated by his speech. Liusu assumes that Liuyuan takes their relationship as playacting. Love inspires in him romantic and frivolous dreams. But since there is no feasible plan for the future, it is totally against Liusu's will. "Fan Liuyuan is obsessed by the exciting game of flirtation, but rarely thinks of responsibility," while "Liusu needs no romantic fantasies. What she aspires after is something practical" (Fei 248-49). The conversation during the dinner becomes an oral battle in which the ideologies of Liusu and Liuyuan are in combat with each other.

One night, when Liusu and Liuyuan stroll around Repulse Bay, they halt by a remaining wall, where Liuyuan's bantering tone transforms into a deep mourning for the impending desolation, which discloses a sense of insecurity that haunts him:

> "I don't know why," said Liuyuan, looking at her, "but this wall makes me think of the old sayings about the end of the world. Someday, when human civilization has been completely destroyed, when everything is burnt, burst, utterly collapsed and ruined, maybe this wall will still be here. If, at that time, we can meet at this wall, then maybe, Liusu, you will honestly care about me, and I will honestly care about you" [...].

> Liuyuan was silent for a long time. Then he sighed.
>
> "Something you're unhappy about?" said Liusu.
>
> "Lots."
>
> "If someone as free as you thinks that life is unfair, then someone like me ought just go and hang myself."
>
> "I know you're not happy," said Liuyuan. "You've certainly seen more than enough of all these awful people, and awful things, all around us. But if you were seeing them for the first time, it would be even harder to bear, even harder to get used to. That's what it has been like for me. When I arrived in China I was already twenty-four. I had so many dreams about my homeland. You can imagine how disappointed I was. I couldn't stand the shock, and so I started to slip downwards. If…if you had known me before, then maybe you could forgive me for the way I am now." ("Love in a Fallen City" 77)

The dialogue in this episode is nothing less than the monologue of Liuyuan, in which his language "is filled with apocalyptic sentiments" (Lee 296). When he talks about the end of civilization, his "remark is profoundly ironic. On the one hand, it is made all the more poignant because for the first time in his prolonged flirtations it is touched with feeling." But, on the other, it also suggests that "genuine love can only be at the end of the world, at the end of time, when time itself no longer matters" (Lee 296-97). The melancholy mood and the eager need for true love so unfit for

Liuyuan's image as a dandy derive from the nihilism caused by his disappointment towards his homeland. Disillusioned at an early stage of his life, he learns to compensate for his empty heart with constant flirtations. It is the first time Liuyuan takes off his frivolous mask and gets things off his chest in front of Liusu.

In search of "genuine love," Liuyuan is in need of a woman who can understand him:

> Then he laughed suddenly. "Actually, I don't need any excuses! I like to have a good time—and I have plenty of money, plenty of time—do I need any other reason?"
>
> He thought it over, and again grew frustrated. He said to her, "I don't understand myself—but I want you to understand me! I want you to understand me!" He spoke like this, but in his heart he had already given up hope. Still he said stubbornly, plaintively: "I want you to understand me!" ("Love in a Fallen City" 77)

His desperate demand for Liusu to understand him implies that, for Liuyuan, their relationship is more than an ordinary love affair. "If poverty makes Liusu a scheming woman, in order to marry someone, a luxurious life also binds Liuyuan to Liusu. In her company, he wants to rid himself of the sense of endless drift and insecurity" (Fei 248). The discourse which unveils the vulnerability of Liuyuan complicates his ideology. He is not only a profligate son of the rich, but also a sentimental womanizer who still holds onto a romantic dream for the possibility of "genuine love."

However, Liuyuan's words do not court Liusu's understanding, but lead to her realistic concerns of marriage:

> Liusu assessed the situation. It turned out that what Liuyuan cared about was spiritual love. She agreed entirely, since spiritual love always leads to marriage, while carnal love tends to stop at a certain level, with very little hope of marriage. There is only one little problem with spiritual love: in the course of falling in love, the man always says things that the woman doesn't understand. But that doesn't matter too much. In the end there is the getting-married, the house-buying, the furniture-arranging, the servant-hiring—and in all these things, the woman is much more adept than the man. ("Love in a Fallen City" 78)

The narration speaks on behalf of Liusu in response to Liuyuan's emotional speech. Contrary to his wish, she neither understands the sensitive side of his nature nor does she feel uneasy about her inattention. After all, what really matters for her is the financial security that comes from wedlock. "From the beginning, Liusu has been on the alert for war whenever she is with Liuyuan," and the best trophy for her is nothing more than to marry him. "It would be the best outcome if they marry because of love. But love is not her major concern, or it is only a fantasy for her" (Wan 57).

Liusu is unaware of the comfort of love Liuyuan asks for. Neither does Liuyuan realize that marriage, for Liusu, is the determinant for the success or failure of her life. Before Liusu leaves for Hong Kong, the narrator has already exposed her calculation of the affair with Liuyuan:

> Liusu's father had been a famous gambler [...]. Liusu had never touched

> cards or dice, but she too liked to gamble. She decided to wager her future. If she lost, her reputation would be ruined [...]. If she won, she would get the prize that everyone was watching with greedy tiger eyes—Fan Liuyuan—and all her stifled rancor would be washed away. ("Love in a Fallen City" 71)

Her journey to Hong Kong, therefore, is actually a campaign to seize Liuyuan. According to Shui Jing, "in this battle for love, the most difficult goal, for Liusu, is to know whether Liuyuan really falls in love with her, or does he only join in the fun of the occasion of flirting [...]. Liuyuan is too elusive, because his words are always truth mingled with falsehoods" (*Zhang Ailing Weiwan* 99-100).

One night, Liuyuan rings Liusu "to express his love," but since the confession from a philanderer is not fully reliable, she "suspects it is only a dream" (Shui Jing, *Zhang Ailing Weiwan* 100). However, through the telephone, the words "I love you" uttered from his mouth still set "her heart pounding" ("Love in a Fallen City 82). Then, Liuyuan suddenly changes the topic and "quite out of character, proceeds to quote a verse from the ancient Chinese classic *Shijing* [詩經] (*The Book of Songs*)" (Lee 299):

> Then, after a long while, "There's a verse in *The Book of Songs*—"
>
> "I don't understand that sort of thing," Liusu cut in.
>
> "I know you don't understand," Liuyuan said impatiently. "If you understood, it wouldn't need to be explained! So listen: 'Life, death, separation—with thee there is happiness; thy hand in mine, we will grow

> old together.'
>
> "My Chinese isn't very good, and I don't know if I've got it right. I think this is a very mournful poem which says that life and death and parting are all enormous things, far beyond human control. Compared to the great forces in the world, people are very small, very weak. But still we say 'I will stay with you forever, we will never, in this lifetime, leave one another'—as if we really could decide these things!" ("Love in a Fallen City" 82)

The quotation from *The Book of Songs* is a rather abrupt episode which has confused many critics. Shui Jing thinks it is too academic to be the discourse of such a person like Liuyuan who's "Chinese isn't very good" (*Zhang Ailing Weiwan* 104). Leo Ou-fan Lee also remarks that "Liuyuan's suddenly quoting the *Shijing* (*The Book of Songs*) is indeed enigmatic and hard to understand. How can someone born and educated abroad [...] suddenly remember a line from an ancient classic written in the classical language (*wenyan*) [...]?" (299). However, the unexpected plunge into the desolate mood of the fin-de-siècle makes emphatic Liuyuan's pessimistic comments on the uncertainty of love and inevitable destiny of human beings. His lament for the helplessness and insignificance of individuals in an era of destruction mirrors his empty heart occupied by disillusionment.

Liuyuan's ruthful speech, nevertheless, irritates Liusu, because she takes his sentimentalism as an excuse to dissuade her from marriage. Her reply ruins all the romantic sadness in his discourse and it later on bursts into an ardent clash between Liusu and Liuyuan:

> Liusu was silent for a while, but finally she burst out. "Why not go ahead and just say, flat-out, that you don't want to marry me, and leave it at that! Why beat about the bush, with all this talk of not being able to decide things?! [...] If someone as free and unburdened as you are can't decide for himself, then who can decide for you?!"
>
> "You don't love me, have you the power to decide a question such as this?" Liuyuan said coldly.
>
> "If you really love me, why worry if I do?"
>
> "I'm not such a fool that I'll pay to marry someone who doesn't care about me, just so that she can tell me what to do! That's too unfair. And it's unfair to you, too. Well, maybe you don't care. Basically, you think that marriage is long-term prostitution." ("Love in a Fallen City" 82)

The dialogue paints a clear picture of the ideological incompatibility between Liuyuan and Liusu. What Liuyuan asks for is a woman who loves him wholeheartedly. Thus, he becomes suspicious of her intention which makes marriage equivalent to money. But whether his discourse smacks of sentiment or cynicism, it seems to Liusu merely a verbal game of flirtation. Thus, she refuses to promise him love, as "they both were such clever people, making their plans so carefully that they had never dared to take the risk" ("Love in a Fallen City" 85). The different psychologies of Liusu and Liuyuan are the results of their different perceptions of love and marriage, as summarized by Mei Jialing in the citation below:

> Liuyuan does not indeed need marriage, but he hopes that Liusu can "understand" him. He hopes she will show her sincerity, and then his dream that "you will honestly care about me, and I will honestly care about you" will finally be fulfilled. Otherwise, it is only an unnecessary sacrifice to "marry someone who does not care about" him. For Liusu, her ultimate goal is nothing but marriage. There is still the space for arguments whether or not she is able to "understand" Liuyuan. But she does not think it is important to understand him [...]. As a result, with the ideological divergence between them, their relationship becomes "a battle that tests their wisdom of love," and they scheme against each other in a battle which actually happens in their hearts. (263-64)

Customers in the hotel believe that they are a couple. While Liuyuan is delighted by the misunderstanding, Liusu is overwhelmed by worry and panic. She realizes that "whenever they were in public, he made sure to give the impression of affectionate intimacy, so that she had no way to prove that they had not slept together" ("Love in a Fallen City" 83). To prevent herself from being his mistress, Liusu decides to go back to Shanghai. However, as soon as she is back, she is confronted with "the ideology of her family which consists of the conservative morals of marriage" again. (Mei 264). The narrator reports to the readers the dilemma Liusu is trapped in:

> Liusu knew very well when she went back that things would be even worse than before. The ties of affection and loyalty between her and this family had long ago been severed. Of course she considered looking for a job, anything to earn a bowl of rice. No matter how rough it was, it would

> still be better than living with a hostile family. But if she took some menial job, she would lose her social status. That status wasn't something you could eat, but losing it would be a pity. And she had not yet given up all hope concerning Fan Liuyuan. She could not sell herself cheap now, or else he would have a perfect excuse for refusing to marry her. And so she just had to hang on a little while longer. ("Love in a Fallen City" 84)

Liusu endures her malevolent family for an autumn until Liuyuan sends a telegram from Hong Kong, asking her to come back to him. Finally, Liusu gives in, because "in one autumn, she had already aged two years—she could not afford to get old" ("Love in a Fallen City" 85). During her second trip to Hong Kong, she, however, "did not have any of her earlier eagerness for adventure. She had lost." It would be better "if she had been vanquished solely by Fan Liuyuan's charms [...]. But mixed with that was the pressure from her family—the most painful factor in her defeat" ("Love in a Fallen City" 85).

"Going to Hong Kong again, Liusu has no other choice but to be Liuyuan's mistress. In the battles either with her family or with Liuyuan, she is defeated." However, later on, when Japan invades Hong Kong and the war breaks out, it becomes the "turning point which helps her turn the tables" (Mei 265). Stranded in the Repulse Bay Hotel, Liusu and Liuyuan are "forced to live on a limited budget and to while away the empty days and nights by themselves, they come to find each other indispensable" (Cheng, "Themes and Techniques in Eileen Chang's Stories" 174). Thus, when the armies declare a truce, Liuyuan decides to marry Liusu. As Mei Jialing comments, "genuine love appears in adversities. During the war, both Liusu, who only wants marriage but never understands what love is, and Liuyuan, who only expects love (or sexual passion) but refuses marriage, walk out of the psychological fortresses built out of their selfish concerns" (265).

Marriage seems to be a happy ending for Liusu. But Zhang still casts doubts on the positive outcome of their love. As she remarks in "Writing of One's Own":

> In "Love in a Fallen City," Liusu escapes from her corrupt traditional family, but the baptism of the Battle of Hong Kong does not transform her into a revolutionary. The Battle of Hong Kong does affect Fan Liuyuan in the sense that it steers him toward a more settled existence and finally marriage, but marriage does not make him a saint or compel him to abandon completely his old habits and ingrained tendencies. (*Written on Water* 17)

Zhang's own study of the characters suggests that, though the war brings Liusu and Liuyuan together, it does not change much of their way of thinking. They get married with an attempt to remove the shadow of massive destruction imposed by the war. As Leo Ou-fan Lee points out, Zhang "allows the outcome of marriage—a result not of the couple's romance but of the external intervention of war" (301). Therefore, "although Liusu and Liuyuan's marriage is healthy in some ways, it remains prosaic, earth-bound, and, given their situation, it could be nothing more" (A. Zhang, *Written on Water* 17). The humdrum and monotonous matrimony hints that the marriage does not patch up the difference between Liusu and Liuyuan.

One day after the war, they go to town together:

> Liuyuan stopped walking and gazed for a while, sensing the terror in this ordinary scene, and shivered. "Now you must believe 'Death, life, separation…' How can we decide things? When the bombing was going on,

> just one little slip…"
>
> Liusu chided him: "Even now you still say you haven't the power to decide?"
>
> "No, no, I'm not giving up half-way! What I mean is…" He looked at her face, then laughed. "O.K, I won't try to say it!"
>
> They went on walking, and Liuyuan said, "The gods must be behind this; we really did find out what love is!"
>
> "You said a long time ago that you loved me."
>
> "That doesn't count. We were too busy falling in love, how could we possibly find time to really love?" ("Love in a Fallen City" 91-92)

Liuyuan is still incredulous about love, and would rather believe that it is war which brings about their marriage. Claiming that they are too busy to fall in love, he also suggests that, before the war traps them, to date Liusu means nothing more than to dally with her. Liusu, by contrast, is almost provoked when Liuyuan insists that he does not have the power to decide, as this is to confess that his passion for her does not persuade him into marriage.

Liuyuan is compromised because of the war, but his foppish and flirtatious characteristics remain. His ideology is that of a philanderer by nature, and "had there not been the war, Fan Liuyuan might have never married Bai Liusu" (Fei 249). The narrative voice, however, discloses to the readers what grieves Liusu after they are married. Liuyuan "did not try to tease her anymore, saving all his daring talk for other women. This was good, something to celebrate, since it meant he took her as family—his real, official wife—but Liusu was still somewhat saddened by it" ("Love in a Fallen City" 92). Liusu is aware that the ideological gap between her and Liuyuan is unbridgeable and it is the gap that leaves in her heart a trace of disconsolation.

Stephen Cheng defines the truth of love Zhang arrives at in her stories:

> Truly romantic love that will uplift one's soul, demands the utter abandonment of oneself, which most people are incapable of [...].
>
> Yet love is there in her stories, as incomplete as her characters, with its petty jealousy and hurts and its little joys and delights. Her characters still search for it and sometimes find it, albeit imperfect and compromised. ("Themes and Techniques in Eileen Chang's Stories" 171)

If "truly romantic love" requires the full understanding and trust between lovers, then the discrepancy between Liusu and Liuyuan makes their love only an "imperfect and compromised" one, and Zhang "is only too keenly aware of such limitations" (Cheng, "Themes and Techniques in Eileen Chang's Stories" 174). Thus, the narrator of the story tells us that, at most, Liuyuan "was just a selfish man, and" Liusu "was just a selfish woman. In this age of chaos and disorder, there is no place for individualists, but there is always room for an ordinary married couple." ("Love in a Fallen City" 91)

The plot of "Love in a Fallen City" unfolds two groups of ideological conflicts, the one between Liusu and her family, and the other between Liusu and Liuyuan.

The conflicts are portrayed through the dialogical battles, which are, ironically, more prominent than the real war. As Fei Yong notices, Liuyuan is "a man lost in the world of lust and seduction. His slight melancholy caused by aimlessness and loneliness requires some consolation from a woman like Liusu. However, what he demands is a spiritual and abstract comfort, not a concrete and realistic family" (249). As for Liusu, marriage guarantees a life of sound finance. "Even if she really falls in love with Liuyuan later on, her love is still motivated by her selfish interests" (Fei 245). "The story," following Zhang's words, "is written from Liusu's point of view, and she has never fully understood Liuyuan" (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 15,* 193). She could not understand that Liuyuan longs for true love to compensate him for desolation and disillusion. However, he is too used to the game of flirtation to assume the responsibility that comes along with wedlock. Neither could Liuyuan understand that Liusu is concerned about the practicality of marriage because she has gambled her life on it. To exact revenge against the Bai family, she has to prove that she is a woman still worthy of marriage. Liusu is forced to fight for everything she wants, and there is no one she can turn to. Therefore, "whether Liusu is triumphal or defeated, she is always in a cheap and humiliated position" (A. Zhang, *Zhang Ailing Quanji 15,* 95). Marriage does not glorify her life with love. It is only an expediency to regain and secure the dignity she is robbed of. However, Liuyuan is completely ignorant of the hostile and helpless situation Liusu faces.

Fei Yong feels deep sorrow for the story between Liusu and Liuyuan. He wonders "with what kind of attitude can both a man and a woman really understand each other, really fall in love, and really be comforted by love? Why is there always the slight misunderstanding between them? And what ensues is the lifelong disappointment and regret" (254). As Zhang remarks, this story aims to depict "the frustrating and unreliable relationships among people" (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 15,* 103), which will bring forth "the lifelong disappointment and regret" that befall Liusu and Liuyuan. Taking the catastrophic war as the background, Zhang projects the ideological incompatibilities between the characters to the foreground and indicates that it is her major concern to portray in her story "the agony caused by people incapable of communicating with and understanding one another" (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 8,* 236).

### 5. Ideologies and Heteroglossia in "Traces of Love"

"'Traces of Love' is a story about a couple that are bored at home who therefore decide to visit their relative" on a rainy November afternoon (J. Zhang, *Zhang Ailing Xinlun* 15). Similar to "Ah Xiao's Unhappy Autumn," it is also a slice of life rendered with nary a dramatic element. The female protagonist, Chunyu Dunfeng 淳于敦鳳 was windowed for more than ten years before she re-married to Mr. Mi 米先生 as his concubine. Their marriage certificate hanging on the wall reveals the age difference between them. Dunfeng is only thirty six, while Mr. Mi is almost sixty years old. The beginning of the story focuses on an image of the charcoal that has almost burnt out, much like the life of Mr. Mi. The charcoal thus symbolizes the approaching senility of Mr. Mi. "Although it was just November, they had lighted a fire at home, just a small brazier with red-hot charcoal in snow-white ashes. The coal had been a tree. Then the tree died, yet now, in the glowing fire, its body had come alive again—alive, but soon turned into ashes" (trans. by Eva Hung, in *Traces of Love* 92). As Shui Jing points out, the glowing fire that will "soon turn into ashes" alludes to his second marriage: it is a marriage "at the twilight of his life, it is like the glaring sunset. No matter how dazzling it might be, soon it will be devoured by the dim dusk" (*Zhang Ailing Weiwan* 31). He has already passed his prime, whereas Dunfeng, surviving the bleak days of widowhood, only begins to enjoy the fruit of her re-marriage. The story starts with the narration of a domestic scene, the tone of which is rather objective and distant. However, the narrative voice actually "creates an atmosphere and delivers a message" (Shui Jing, *Zhang Ailing Weiwan* 31) which implies the different prospects of the marriage between Dunfeng and Mr. Mi.

Their ideologies concerning the second marriage are different in that Mr. Mi wants to get himself a partner in his declining years, while Dunfeng marries for economic concerns. She needs a husband to provide for her. It is worth noting that the family name "Mi" means rice, the staple most Chinese live on, and to be married with a man surnamed Mi suggests that the success of her second marriage depends on the financial support of her husband. "For her own living, she has to get married with a simple-minded, wealthy, but aged man. Her relatives also lecture her to take good care of his money" (J. Zhang, *Zhang Ailing Xinlun* 15). The narrative voice betrays Dunfeng's inner-consciousness as she compares Mr. Mi with her first husband:

> She thought of herself as a remarkable beauty; as for Mr. Mi, except for his glasses, everything about him looked like a baby, small-eyed and small-nosed, as if it couldn't make up its mind whether to cry or not [...]. Dunfeng cast a quick glance at Mr. Mi and turned her head. His head and his face were completely smooth—very neat, exactly like a big steamed bun made from No. 3 rationed flour, sitting very solemnly on the collar of his shirt. However knavish her first husband had been, his appearance had never made her feel ashamed of him, ashamed to admit that this was her husband. He died when he was only twenty-five: a long narrow face, well-defined eyes and eyebrows. When he smiled his eyes were wicked. (*Traces of Love* 110-111)

In other words, Mr. Mi's appearance disgraces Dunfeng. Her first husband, dying young, thus leaves an artful and smart image in her memory. However, in comparison with the young man, Mr. Mi is but a dotard. The unspeakable discontent with Mr. Mi hovers in Dunfeng's mind, but she never makes it a discourse.

Likewise, Mr. Mi bears in his mind the days being together with his first wife, and the quarrels and squabbles that ruined his first marriage, with the foil of which he evaluates his second marriage:

> His wife had always been neurotic, and later her temper became even more violent, so much that all her children rowed with her [...]. He had seldom been with her these last few years. Even the old days when they were in love seemed to have been muddled through in a hurry; all he could remember were the fights, there were no happy memories to treasure. And yet it was the youthful pain, the anxious years which had truly touched his heart. Even now, as he recalled them, winter and the ash-like rain entered his eyes. He felt a prickling sensation in his nose.
>
> [...] This was his woman now, gentle, superior, and quite a beauty a couple of years ago. This time he had not tumbled into marriage; he had made enquiries and plans to make sure that in his old age he would have a bit of peace and a pretty companion to make up for past unhappiness [...]. Mr. Mi smiled at her. With the woman of his past, it was rows and fights. With her, sometimes he had to say 'I'm sorry', sometimes 'thank you'. But that was all: thank you, I'm sorry. (*Traces of Love* 96-98)

The narrative voice speaks on behalf of Mr. Mi this time. Through his consciousness we can tell how Mr. Mi defines his relation with Dunfeng. His first wife was irritable and quarrelsome. To avoid making the same mistake, Mr. Mi learned how to treat Dunfeng with respect. They are demure and polite to each other, but the civility also denies the outpouring of their sincere feelings. Thus, "the marriage was no more than 'sorry's and thank you's" (Cheng, "Themes and Techniques in Eileen Chang's Stories" 172). The tumultuous days with his first wife, though painful, recall for him the impulsive youth when he could live his life to the full. On the contrary, his interaction with Dunfeng, courteous as it might be, is actually empty and apathetic. Shifting back and forth between the inner perspective of Dunfeng and Mr. Mi, the narrator discloses their disappointment and dissatisfaction with each other, and also offers the ground for the conflicts happening in their dialogues.

Before Dunfeng is about to leave for her aunt's house, "there is a little strain between them because of Mr. Mi's intended visit to his dying wife" (Cheng, "Themes and Techniques in Eileen Chang's Stories" 172):

> 'I'll be back in a while,' said Mr. Mi. He found it difficult to put this into words [...]. He used to refer to his other wife as 'her', until Dunfeng objected, saying, 'But no one speaks like that!' After that, on the rare occasion when he referred to her, he used headless sentences.
>
> He said now, 'Quite ill. I've got to go and have a look.'
>
> 'Go on,' said Dunfeng laconically.
>
> Something in her voice made Mr. Mi feel that he couldn't just go. He put

> his hands on the window-sill and looked out, mumbling to himself, 'I wonder if it's going to rain?'
>
> Dunfeng looked slightly impatient. She wound the wool up, stuffed her knitting into the floral bag, and made to go out. But as soon as she opened the door, Mr. Mi. stopped her, trying to explain, 'I don't mean....All these years now....Really quite ill, and no one there to look after things. I can't possibly....'
>
> This irritated Dunfeng. She said, 'Is there any need to say all this? What'd people think if they heard you?' (*Traces of Love* 93)

The conversation not only "makes vivid their indifferent and distant attitude toward each other" (J. Zhang, *Zhang Ailing Xinlun* 15), but also displays the discrepancy between Dunfeng and Mr. Mi. He wants to visit his severely ill wife, but is also afraid that Dunfeng would be unhappy about his visit. Therefore, to soothe her, he tries to make this visit seem reasonable and necessary. Aware of Mr. Mi.'s purpose, Dunfeng does not actually take it to heart. But she is quite worried that people might think she is narrow-minded and envious of his dying ex-wife. Though it is not pointed out straightforwardly, the clash of their ideologies is given a sketch by means of the incommunicability lurking in the dialogue. Both Dunfeng and Mr. Mi stick to their own opinions about the visit, but their discourse neither reveals their real intention, nor persuades each other that their worries are significant.

Mr. Mi accompanies Dunfeng to her aunt's house, and "stays there for some chit-chat" (Cheng, "Themes and Techniques in Eileen Chang's Stories" 172). After a while, he leaves in order to visit of his first wife. Dunfeng is then left talking with her aunt, the Old Mrs. Yang:

> The old lady smiled and said, 'Why, you should let him go if he wants to. You know very well that he cares about you.'
>
> Dunfeng answered quickly, 'Of course I let him go. First of all, I'm not the jealous type. Besides, I don't have any feelings for him.'
>
> 'You're only saying that out of your anger,' said the old lady smilingly.
>
> Dunfeng's gaze froze upon the old lady [...]. But she was saying with a smile, 'You know very well how things stand with me. For me, it's just a way of getting a living.'
>
> 'But still, you're now husband and wife....' Said the old lady with a smile.
>
> Dunfeng became agitated. She said, 'I don't hold anything back from you, Auntie. If I had wanted a man, I would not have married Mr. Mi.' Her face flushed, she moved even closer to old Mrs. Yang and said in a low, laughing voice, 'In fact we seldom do it, maybe once every few months.' Having said this she stared at the other woman, still smiling.
>
> [...] Dunfeng guessed what the old lady had in mind, and continued before she could say anything, 'I know you're going to say that there's more to a marriage than that, but with someone like Mr. Mi., it's difficult to have feelings for him.'

> 'He really treats you well, and as far as I can see, you don't treat him badly either.'
>
> 'Well, even if it's for completely selfish reasons I have to take care of him: what to wear, what to eat….I have to make sure that he gets fed properly so he'll live a couple of years more.' (*Traces of Love* 113-14)

In her conversation with the old lady, Dunfeng brings to light all her complaints and selfish calculations about the marriage with Mr. Mi. She has confessed that to be married with Mr. Mi is just "a way of getting a living," and in fact she does not have feelings for him. The hint that Mr. Mi is declining in his sexuality leads to another callous comparison between him and Dunfeng's first husband. The man dying young is superior to the aging one both in terms of his appearance and in his virility. The exposure of Dunfeng's ideology through the dialogue with her aunt underscores the fact that their marriage, from Dunfeng's point of view, largely involves in her economic interests.

The Old Mrs. Yang, nevertheless, thinks Dunfeng does not match Mr. Mi:

> The old lady [...] thought to herself: 'He has a high status in the brokerage, he's well educated in Chinese and Western learning, he's polite, and *so* considerate—and Dunfeng managed to marry him! Dunfeng isn't *that* young, and yet she doesn't seem to have any tact. The way she talks is so hurtful to him, and he just takes it! The times have certainly changed; these days men bow to such behavior. In the old days, she'd never have got away with it. But it's not as if Dunfeng has never suffered at the hands of

> men, why is she so ungrateful? Mr. Mi must be about sixty, exactly my age. Why should I have such a rotten lot and be burdened with a family?—a daughter-in-law who behaves outrageously, and a son so infuriated by her that he doesn't come home much. Everything has fallen on my shoulders. If I could be like Dunfeng, living quietly with my man in a house of our own—just the two of us! I'm an old woman now, all I want is to be free from such cares and worries, nothing else really…' (*Traces of Love* 109)

The thought flowing in her mind demonstrates that the Old Mrs. Yang is in battle with Dunfeng concerning the contrast between their evaluations of Mr. Mi. She considers Mr. Mi to be of courtly manner and scholarly attainments, the ideal husband for a widowed woman, whereas Dunfeng, apparently, patronizes him. The Old Mrs. Yang, on the one hand, blames Dunfeng for not respecting Mr. Mi, and, on the other, starts lamenting about her own fate. The self-pitying monologue in her mind also reveals her disharmonious relationship with her daughter-in-law, Mrs. Yang.

The tension between Mr. Mi and Dunfeng is, to some degree, due to his intimate relationship with Mrs. Yang. According to Shui Jing, Mrs. Yang has some kind of "nymphomaniac character," and "she attracts men as if she was a wanton and licentious girl" (*Zhang Ailing Weiwan* 29). She is described to be the apple of men's eyes:

> Like a French hostess, she received gifts of flowers and chocolates, which were most flattering to her self-esteem. A good number of men came to tell her how unreasonable their wives were; Mr. Mi had been one of them. Since he received little consolation at home, he was fond of spending time

> with other people's wives—just talking and joking with them was enough to make him happy. Because of this, Mrs. Yang had always thought that she had given Mr. Mi to Dunfeng. (*Traces of Love* 100)

The narrator recounts the history of her acquaintance with Mr. Mi, but at the end suddenly unravels the secret thought in Mrs. Yang's mind: it is by her grace that Dunfeng can marry Mr. Mi.

Instead of appreciating her help, Dunfeng, however, takes Mrs. Yang as her rival in love. When Mrs. Yang "greeted Mr. Mi she did not look directly at him, as if to avoid suspicion. She held affectionately onto Dunfeng's hand and asked again, in a hushed voice, 'How are you?', all the while examining her from top to toe with irrepressible fondness, as though the woman Dunfeng were entirely her creation. Dunfeng hated her for it" (*Traces of Love* 100-101). The thoughts in their mind are sharply polarized. Under the friendly greeting of Mrs. Yang is her expressive gaze that searches for Dunfeng's gratitude, since she takes herself as the benefactor of Dunfeng. Nevertheless, the gaze actually irritates Dunfeng, "she hated her" because Mrs. Yang never approved of her attraction with which she earned her second marriage. The conflict between them keeps hanging in their conversation about Mr. Mi's dying ex-wife.

Mrs. Yang is boasting of her popularity among men, but Dunfeng is rather indifferent to a topic like this. Their chat then focuses on Dunfeng's marriage:

> Mrs. Yang stretched out her snowy fragrant hand to take hold of Dunfeng's hand. She said with a smile, 'You look so well these days....A life like yours can probably be said to be ideal!'

> Were Dunfeng to admit to being happy in front of Mrs. Yang, she would also be admitting to owning her a favour. That was why she had to complain more bitterly than ever. She said, 'You'd never realize what I have to put up with!'
>
> [...] She said, 'The old woman's ill. The fortune-teller said that his wife will die this year. Didn't you see how disgustingly unsettled he looked?'
>
> With half of her face buried in her coat, Mrs. Yang observed Dunfeng with narrowed, judgmental eyes. She thought: 'Now that she's a concubine she certainly behaves like one! All this "old woman" stuff. Next she'll be calling Mr. Mi "the old man"!'
>
> Mrs. Yang laughed and said, 'Wouldn't it be nice if she died?'
>
> Dunfeng was not pleased with her teasing tone of voice. She replied, 'I don't want her to die. She's no obstacle as far as I'm concerned!'
>
> 'That's true. If I were you I wouldn't care about names and titles. The important thing is to get your hands on the money,' said Mrs. Yang. (*Traces of Love* 118-19)

In the conversation between the two women, none of them speak of what is really in their minds, except for the purposeful display of Dunfeng's grievance against Mr. Mi and Mrs. Yang's hypocritical consoling affection. The communication that, on the surface, looks like the intimate whispers between Dunfeng and Mrs. Yang is only to gloss over the hostility they harbor towards each other, while their consciousnesses serve to be the inner monologues which express their true intentions. Dunfeng is reluctant to be fully satisfied with her marriage lest she might credit her happiness to Mrs. Yang. The monologue murmuring in Mrs. Yang's mind is even more malevolent. From the bottom of her heart, she never recognizes Dunfeng as Mr. Mi's legal wife. She keeps discovering the disposition suggesting itself in Dunfeng's discourse: her inherent concubine personality.

Dunfeng continues to talk about how the maid, Amah Zhang, keeps pestering her with daily trifles since she takes Dunfeng as the real hostess in the house. When talking to the servants, Dunfeng has "a low-pitched, elderly and ill-tempered voice, but also somewhat saccharine, like a Madame's" (*Traces of Love* 94). Trying to patronize the maids creates for Dunfeng an image of a narrow-minded woman who is insecure about her authority. Therefore, the interaction between Dunfeng and the maid only confirms Mrs. Yang's judgment that Dunfeng is every inch a concubine. She will never be bestowed with the sublime composure of a wife confident of her status:

> Every time she wanted something she just thrust her face in front of me and says "Mrs. Mi this, Mrs. Mi that." As for Mr. Mi, just encourages them. No matter what it is, he says, "Go and ask the Mrs.!" I suppose he means well, letting me do the servants the favors…'
>
> Mrs. Yang stole a glance at Dunfeng, listening to her repetition of 'Mrs. Mi' with a smile. She thought: A veritable concubine! (*Traces of Love* 120)

For Mrs. Yang, to identify Dunfeng with the concubine is also to allude to the fact that Dunfeng is secondary for Mr. Mi, while she is his real soul mate to whom he used to confide his dissatisfaction with his first wife. The disharmony between Dunfeng and Mrs. Yang is caused by the fact that they both want to justify that they carry much influence over Mr. Mi. On the surface, the conversation goes smoothly, but it is the unspoken words in their minds that declare the war between the two women.

Later on, Mr. Mi returns from his first wife's residence, walking to the balcony and looking at the rainbow. The narrative voice speaks for him his desolate thoughts. "Mr. Mi looked up at the rainbow, thinking of his dying wife. With her death, most of his life would be over, too. The sorrow and anger he had felt when they were living together were forgotten, completely forgotten. Mr. Mi looked at the rainbow. His love for the world was no longer love, it became compassion" (*Traces of Love* 124). His first marriage, though a failure, is still memorable and touching. As Shui Jing remarks, "the traces of love in Mr. Mi and Dunfeng's hearts are not those about people in front of their eyes," but rather about their former lovers, and "the secrets in their minds are unspeakable" (*Zhang Ailing Weiwan* 31) to each other. Dunfeng could grumble about her marriage merely when Mr. Mi was absent, while Mr. Mi buries all the thoughts in his mind. The readers can catch a glimpse of his ideology only when the narrator unveils it. The dialogue between them is simply occupied by the paltry arguments over insignificant issues, behind which the real conflict between their ideologies is brewing.

The story in which there is hardly any stirring or exciting episode is enriched by the heteroglossia where the languages of Dunfeng, Mr. Mi, the Old Mrs. Yang and Mrs. Yang are displayed and interact with one another. The four characters engage in conflict with one another, by way of the dialogues that show the affectation of their disingenuous politeness, and of the inner monologues that voice their real feelings and honest complaints. "Traces of Love" ends with the following paragraph. "In this world, all relationship are frayed and patched up. Still, on their way home Dunfeng and Mr. Mi loved each other. Walking on the fallen leaves that so much resembled fallen petals, Dunfeng reminded herself to tell him about the macaw when they walked past the post office" (*Traces of love* 125). According to Shui Jing, the symbol of the parrot derives from the Tang poem " Gongci" 宮詞 (Within the Palace). The last two sentences of the poem are "they will complain of their lonesome palace life, only afraid that the parrot might tell a tale second-hand" (trans. by Xu Yuan-zhong, in *Three Hundred Poems* 310). Parrots are considered to be the betrayers of secrets. Moreover, the post office is where the messages are collected and delivered. Therefore, to parallel the post office and the parrot is to emphasize the desire to pour forth what is on one's mind (Shui Jing, *Shuoliang* 209). However, unable and unwilling to talk about their thoughts, both Dunfeng and Mr. Mi are silent, allowing the narrative voice to create for them a scene where the unpleasant and awkward friction between them comes to a halt, and where the ideological clash between them also comes to a compromise. The conflict between Dunfeng, Mr. Mi, the Old Mrs. Yang and Mrs. Yang still remain unresolved, but they seem to fade out with the falling leaves, not significant anymore.

## 6. Chinese Religion in Zhang Ailing's Eyes

In these four stories, the intricate interactions and the open strife or veiled struggles between the characters are the results of their being unable to communicate and understand each other. Bakhtin's focus on discourse in the novel steers our attention towards the language of the characters, and helps us to realize that the ideological conflict indeed incurs a series of verbal confrontations which lead to the disharmonious relationships among people. Moreover, the interpersonal relationship is not only granted a delicate portrayal in Zhang's stories but it is also the keynote of her essay "Demons and Fairies," in which she argues that the concern of relationships is the hallmark of Chinese religion. The essay, first published in the English journal, *Twentieth Century*, was later translated and re-written by herself into a Chinese article entitled "The Religion of the Chinese." As far as Zhang is concerned, Chinese religion is all about the proper and circumspect maneuvering of the relationships with people. At the beginning of the essay, Zhang disclaims the entity of Chinese religion, and asserts that "a rough survey of current Chinese thought would force us to the conclusion that there is no such thing as the Chinese religion. The Chinese intelligentsia have always been staunchly atheistic" ("Demons and Fairies" 421). Instead, what features in Chinese religion is that "it evaluates people not according to their faith but their behavior" (Zhang, *Zhang Ailing Quanji 14,* 36). The behavior pertains to the etiquette people adopt when dealing with each other. The Chinese make equal the weight of relationships and that of their religious morals. Therefore, Zhang claims that "in ancient China, all the goodness derives from relationships" because "the Chinese have no other faith except for the faith in relationships" (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 14,* 34-35).

Concerned much about the associations among people, the Chinese religion forms a group of "Bohemian fairies" (A. Zhang, "Demons and Fairies" 426), or in Zhang's Chinese translation they are defined as *xianren* 仙人 (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 14,* 30). These supernatural beings, deprived of their ethereal aura, live a life which is a reprint of that of the wealthy people in the secular world. "Sheltered and leisurely, the fairies are chiefly occupied with the mild pursuits of chess-playing, music, travel, and drinking, which in the East is considered more a cultivated pastime than a vice" ("Demons and Fairies" 427). However, an eternal life without vicissitude "speaks only of a benumbed consciousness" ("Demons and Fairies"427).

Thus, the Chinese set up another group of "earth fairies," also known as *dixian* 地仙 (A. Zhang, *Zhang Ailing Quanji 14,* 30), whose images are so close to human beings that they are "no different from ordinary millionaires except for the additional blessing of immortal youth" ("Demons and Fairies" 427). A tale tells that a Chinese, sailing across a lake, runs into his friend who "has married into a family of 'earth fairies'" and is "invited on board where he is magnificently entertained" ("Demons and Fairies" 427). To connect the earthly world to the celestial sphere in a Chinese folk story makes more emphatic the secularization of the Chinese religion. Zhang then concludes the story by saying that:

> fairyhood leaves a Chinese alone to enjoy his riches, free from all claims upon him by members of his family and clan. Though pleasurable in this respect, this irresponsible state of existence deprives him of the opportunity of practicing his art of living with people, in which the Chinese excel. Everybody loathes giving up his specialty, however irksome its exercising may be to him. Hence we observe the twofold reaction of desire and distaste in the Chinese attitude toward fairyhood. ("Demons and Fairies" 427)

Accordingly, the story of fairyhood traps the Chinese in a dilemma where they are torn between the desire to enjoy a carefree life and the worry that they will be detached from the secular world and unable to exercise their skills of living with people. Thus, no matter how fascinating the world of fairyhood is, the Chinese can never discard their worldly-wise shrewdness.

Life of fairyhood, tedious due to its lack of the interaction between people, is by comparison less attractive than that in hell, where the art of dealing with relationships is more useful and influential:

> The Chinese have a Taoist heaven and a Buddhist hell. All souls depart to hell after death to be judged there, so that it is not simply the abode of the damned in the Christian sense. The Shadowy Region, though first conceived as a land of eternal twilight, is often pictured as a normal city in which the chief attraction for tourists is the prison house with its eighteen floors of torture chambers. It is not uncommon for the souls of living men to issue forth from their bodies during sleep and wander into hell, where they meet old acquaintances who show them all the sights. ("Demons and Fairies" 422)

Since people are able to visit their dead relatives or friends in hell, they are given the chance to practice the skills of getting along with people. As a result, the Chinese dream little about the redemption of souls and the eternal life in heaven, because they are "content with an eternal chain of humdrum lives" ("Demons and Fairies" 425). Life in the secular world provides everything they look for because "it is comparatively easy to do the right thing since there is no right beyond the harmony of feeling and reason, and that should be plain to all" ("Demons and Fairies" 425).

The study of a Chinese hell accentuates the Chinese obsessions with the mundane life where the art of living has its full display. Moreover, as the Chinese fairyhoods are enriched with "an occasional contact with humanity," the Chinese heaven is, however, "painted in paler tones and with a less sure touch than the Chinese hell because it has less to do with the vital concerns of humanity" ("Demons and Fairies" 427, 425). Therefore, "the supernatural world in Chinese stories is desolate and pale. Compared with it, life in the secular world seems to be more abundant and self-sufficient" (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 14,* 33). For the Chinese, the unparalleled attraction of secularity is credited to their fascination with the repetitive pattern of life:

> If they have behaved tolerably well they may look forward to an infinite succession of slightly variegated human lives, in which they fulfill predestinated connections, unwittingly sow seeds for future attachments, tie knots of hatred and have them unfastened—the delightfully giddy mating of cause and effect. The Chinese have taken a fancy to life in this particular aspect, and once the Chinese find anything to their liking they keep to it [...]. The sustained repetition in Ravel's *Bolero* is always present in classical Chinese music, whether the subject be "Autumn in the Hang Palace" or "Wild Geese Alighting on Level Sand." The steadfast rumination of a recurrent theme never comes to a climax and stops only to begin anew as another composition. ("Demons and Fairies" 427)

Karma, the law of cause and effect, contributes to the philosophy of a circular life where the Chinese experience incessant reincarnations and keep their attachments to people they are acquainted with in previous lives. Since "the most important prerequisite for the human subject is personal connections"("Demons and fairies" 429), the Chinese enjoy the "recurrent theme" of life, where the structure of *qi* 、*cheng* 、*zhuan* 、*he* could hardly be applied, and where there is an endless repetition of interactions between individuals in the transmigrations of their souls.

Restricted within the "limitations of the human scope" ("Demons and Fairies" 429) and convinced that life moves in circles, the Chinese are seldom motivated to set off a spiritual search for a metaphysical answer to existence:

> Seriously interested neither in the source nor the end of existence, the Chinese have hitherto resisted the general movement of all civilization toward the "why" in life. According to the Chinese, preoccupation with thing outside the human scope gives opportunity to the supernatural spirits to make their influences felt, and such communication is dangerous aside from being unpleasant. Men all over the world refrain from thoughts of death if they can help it, and the Chinese can. They concentrate on the small illuminated area of life as they see it. We must own after all that the Chinese religion is no less a religion because it has effect only within the scope outside which we find nothing but a vague comprehensive sadness. All is vanity. ("Demons and Fairies" 429)

Since anything beyond the reach of the human world is a patch of vast and indefinable emptiness, the Chinese pivot their perceptions on "the small illuminated area of life" to avert their eyes from the horror of death. The secular disposition of the Chinese declines the Christian doctrine which preaches that "the life of human beings is only a part of the universe," because for the Chinese who "always take the mortal life as the centre of the cosmos," an imperishable life becomes meaningless (Zhang, *Zhang Ailing Quanji 14,* 36-37). Therefore, the eternal life snuggled in God's arms loses its charm in the eyes of the Chinese. Not arrested by the idea of eternity, the Chinese minds do not ponder on the absolute termination of life either. They "compare the progress of history to the continuation of bamboo joints. One period of halcyon days joins another period of troubled time. History keeps going like this forever" (Zhang, *Zhang Ailing Quanji 14,* 36). It is fair to infer that the Chinese perspective of life and history is dominated by the philosophy of eternal return, the return of life after death, peace after chaos.

The idea of eternal return stops the Chinese from pinning down the destination of life. As Zhang remarks, "an educated Chinese does not believe that man personally is heading anywhere in particular on his journey through time, and the same applies to the human race" ("Demons and Fairies" 421). If the human race is not moving toward a definite goal, the "point of existence" ("Demons and Fairies" 421) will fall under suspicion. However, the Chinese refrain from even the suspicion of the purpose of life. "He would counter that we exist, whether there is a point or not. It matters little what we do with ourselves but, since life is best enjoyed when properly lived, it is for our own happiness that we should behave ourselves—by which is implied the fulfillment of domestic and social obligations" ("Demons and Fairies" 421). The fear that life achieves nothing but futility does not drive the Chinese "to despair, to slackness, to gluttony or excessive sensuality, which to the European may seem the logical reaction" ("Demons and Fairies" 421). The Chinese learn to console themselves by engaging in the secular life, because "it is the solid ground of the secular life that will never be destroyed. The Chinese, seeing through the world of mortals, can only discover the pleasures to support their life in daily trifles. Their perception of life is seasoned with the sense of desolation" (Wan 107).

The lack of a definite answer to life which marks the Chinese religion, as Zhang advocates in this essay, imparts certain influences on the structure of her stories. There is no final image of the characters. Neither is there a finalizing word that tells whether or not they have been inspired by the dialogical conflicts with one another. The Lou sisters are still at variance with Yuqing. Lou Xiaobo and his wife are still entangled in an unhappy matrimony. The polarity between Ah Xiao and Garter stays until the end of the story. Liusu keeps holding a grudge against the Bai family, while she also feels sad, being aware that Liuyuan's view on marriage does not accord with hers. Mr. Mi and Dunfeng bear in their minds different evaluations of their marriage. None of these characters is granted a final solution to their conflict. Therefore, the stories can continue endlessly by further displaying the variety of the characters' ideologies and their disharmonious relationships without making any judgment. To review the structure of the stories, on the one hand, confirms for us that, in these stories, Zhang gives more weight to the portrayal of subtle interactions among people than to a definite conclusion to the conflict. On the other, it leads us to Bakhtin's essay on Dostoevsky, where he claims that " what is firm, dead, finished, unable to respond, whatever has already spoken its final word, does not exist in Dostoevsky's world." In other words, "Dostoevsky's works contain no final, finalizing discourse that defines anything once and for ever" (*Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 251).

According to Bakhtin, Dostoevsky's writing is characteristic of the skill of polyphony. As Michael Gardner elaborates:

> The crux of this 'polyphony' is the suggestion that Dostoevsky's novels contain a plurality of unmerged consciousnesses, a mixture of 'valid voices' which are not completely subordinated to authorial intentions or the heavy hand of the omniscient authorial voices/ narrational voices. That is, the character's voice is equally as important and 'fully weighted' as the author's own, and the former cannot be simply viewed as an appendage of the latter. (24)

Polyphony makes the voices of the characters free from the domination of the narration. Therefore, "nowhere is there a discourse-*dominant*, be it authorial discourse or the discourse of a major hero," and "the character is a carrier of a fully valid word and not the mute, voiceless object of the author's words" (Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 250, 63). Moreover, the characters are "capable of not agreeing with" the author "and even of rebelling against him" (Gardner 24). As a result, the narrator "has none of the perspectives necessary for an artistically finalizing summation of the hero's image or of his acts as a whole" (Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 225). To put equal accent on the discourse of every character prevents Dostoevsky's works from being the sacrifice for the narrator's monologue.

Opposed to monologic writings, Bakhtin contends that "authorial discourse cannot encompass the hero and his world on all sides, cannot lock in and finalize him from without" (*Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 251). If the dialogues of characters are "subordinated to the monologic will of the author," the "characters are static and predetermined, and they lack any vintage of autonomous creativity and free will" (Gardner 27). But the voice of Dostoevsky's narrator is, on the contrary, "dry, informative, documentary discourse, as it were, voiceless discourse, raw material for the voice." In short, "narration in Dostoevsky is always narration without perspective" (Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 251, 225). When the narrator is deprived of its personal opinions, the characters can thus ward off the danger of being finalized and determined.

However, the narrator in Zhang's stories is dominant. It plunges into the character's consciousnesses at will and divulges the ideas they fail to express. Moreover, the narration sometimes creates a scene where the conflict between characters is implied. As Yang Zhao points out:

> The narration in Zhang's stories is densely covered with her opinions. In her writing, there is nothing objective and neutral. Everything has its

> meaning, because the author designates these meanings without any hesitation [...].
>
> In the world of her stories, Zhang Ailing seems to be distant and objective, but she actually shows the ferocity of a totalitarian dictator. She never allows "things to speak for themselves." The meanings of all the symbols are under her control. She has the absolute right to impose upon each character the emotions they should have.
>
> This is the most successful showcase of so-called "authorship" a confident author could achieve. ("Touguo Zhang Ailing Kan Renjian" 478-79)

Accordingly, the narration in these stories is determined by the author's perspective. It is neither dry nor documentary. Instead, the authorial intention hosts the narrative discourse. Nevertheless, the dominant voice of the narrator does not result in a finalizing and determining judgment on the characters. On the contrary, they are still people without "a final and defined quantity upon which firm calculations can be made" (Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 59). At the end of these four stories, the characters are neither sublime nor degenerate, and their conflicts do not reach a definite outcome. It is a contradictory situation when an authoritative author leaves her characters in a pending and indecisive ending. The contradiction lies in the fact that Zhang's works combine two elements exclusive of each other in Bakhtin's theories. The narration is "confined in the fixed framework of the author's discourse," while the characters are still exempted from the "finalizing definition of them" (Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 56, 59). But the contradiction is resolved by the "inner unfinalizability" (Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*

59) of Zhang's stories, and the power for the stories to grow continuously derives from the belief of the "sustained repetition" of life that defines the Chinese mentality.

The steadfast concern of life and the fear of the void lying outside the scope of life also tap into the vein of Chinese painting and Chinese literature. As Zhang claims, Chinese literature boasts of its delicate and minute portrayals of the materialistic aspects of life:

> It is doubtless owing to this agnostic tendency that Chinese literature is pervaded by a great sadness. It finds joy only in materialistic details, which explains why traditional novelists dwell so tirelessly on the unabridged items in meals and love-making (complete menus are often given for no specific purpose). The details can be gay and distracting whereas the theme is invariably pessimistic. All generalizations on life point to nothingness. Poets and thinkers all over the world are aware of this sense of futility; what differentiates the Chinese from the rest is that it always comes at a first revelation and stays in that stage. One Chinese after another sees the withering of a flower and shudders at the impermanence of life, but none ventures any further from that point. ("Demons and Fairies" 421)

It is the detailed descriptions of the secular world that nourishes Chinese literature. However, the obsessive fascination with the substances of life only unveils the nihilism of the Chinese who take anything beyond the reach of life as nothingness.

Chinese painting also conveys the notion of agnosticism that defines Chinese literature. As Zhang points out, there is always "the severe white space in the upper portion," which is "not a vaporous mass of mystical possibilities, but the absolute arresting of thought" ("Demons and Fairies" 421). The severe white space marks the metaphysical and theological pondering of the mystery of being, which the Chinese have little interest in. But without this blank space, "the whole picture would lose its balance." Therefore, "both in art and life, the most difficult thing is to know when to stop, and the Chinese pride themselves on the virtue of restraint" ("Demons and Fairies" 421). The stream of Chinese consciousness will stop by the border between being and nothingness and progress no further. Then, threatened by the infinite emptiness, the Chinese turn back and devote their attentions to the material sides of life. The secularization of Chinese painting, literature and religion elicits from Zhang her understanding of the artistic feat of the Chinese classic, *Dream of the Red Chamber*.

As far as Zhang is concerned, the first eighty chapters of the novel contribute to the extraordinary achievement of this masterpiece:

> According to the original version of the novel, there is no turn of events in the first eighty chapters [...]. The stirring stories all happen in the last forty chapters. In the original version, there is almost no storyline. Even if there is, it appears indistinctly and will come to light only by way of recent textual research. For most readers, the last forty chapters provide the storylines, while the first eighty chapters only draw a fine, delicate and vivid picture of the texture of life. (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 11,* 722)

The nature of the texture of life contains nothing dramatic. The portrayal of life is so prosaic that there is even no storyline. What enriches the novel is the complication of interpersonal relationships that weave together a variety of characters. Zhang's appraisal of *Dream of the Red Chamber* implies nothing less than her attitude both toward life and toward her own writing.

As she remarks in "Writing of One's Own," to make her works "more true to life," she renounces topics about "the dynamic and uplifting aspects of human life," which will become froth if they are not "portrayed against the background of its inherent placidity" (*Written on Water* 16). The placidity comes from the stories of ordinary people engaged in the daily trifles of life where their struggles over petty and insignificant issues lie. In these four stories, the Chinese faith in relationships is depicted through the mosaic pavements of ideology-saturated discourses that are in contact with and in argument with one another. The theme of the story, as Zhang confesses, "is always vague and unsatisfactory" (*Written on Water* 19), because readers find it difficult to identify events that are so thrilling that their attention will be riveted on them. There are only the curious interactions among characters and the conflict caused by discordant ideologies.

The Bakhtinian reading of these stories draws our attention to the study of discourses which reveals the opponent ideologies of people and the conflict that ensues is provoked whenever these characters are unable to abnegate their self-centered desires. The Lou sisters, with the mentality of single women expecting romantic encounters with men, are engrossed in the publicity they will attract in the wedding of their sister-in-law, while Yuqing is indulged in the self-pity of losing her bridal luster and burying herself in a tedious matrimony. Mr. Lou thinks he sacrifices his life to marry a woman who keeps embarrassing and irritating him, but Mrs. Lou feels resentful because her husband treats her with contempt. Liusu is looking for a man to provide for her, while Liuyuan is asking for a woman to console his weary heart. Mr. Mi grieves for his dying ex-wife as well as his lost youth, whereas Dunfeng feels humiliated by marrying an aged man, scarcely comparable to her first husband in terms of attraction and virility. Ah Xiao is the only character dignified by her ever-present concern for people who are in need. She acts as a foil to make conspicuous the debauchery of her miserly employer, Garter. However, her generosity still diminishes into a self-interested concern as she does not tempt to meddle in the mess on the balcony downstairs.

Stephen Cheng sets out the reason that converts Zhang into a pessimist:

> Miss Chang [Zhang Ailing] [...] averred that all human conflicts rise from the wickedness of the heart, and that malice is not in the monopoly of any class [...]. Eileen Chang alone delved into the labyrinth of the heart in her search for the truth [...]. In her relentless exploration she arrives at a harrowing truth about the human world, hence her stories are always imbued with an inherent sadness, and also with a compassion and pleas for mutual understanding. ("Themes and Techniques in Eileen Chang's Stories" 170)

The "inherent sadness" that permeates among Zhang's stories is planted by the unresolved conflict derived from the selfish concern "inherent" in the hearts of people. Zhang is aware that "the human heart always has to contend with its own ego," and her "pleas for mutual understanding" will only end in futility, because people, conditioned by egoistic desires, are simply incapable of "the utter abandonment of oneself" (Cheng, "Themes and Techniques in Eileen Chang's Stories" 171). However, it is Zhang's delicate portrayals of interpersonal relationships saturated with intricate friction that illustrate the quintessence of the Chinese art of living. In addition, her unique overview of the Chinese religion also invites further studies of her obsession with China that continues to develop in the essay, "Days and Nights of China," which she makes the epilogue of *Chuanqi.*

# Chapter Four

## “Days and Nights of China” and Zhang Ailing’s Obsession with China

This chapter evolves from Zhang’s essay, “Days and Nights of China.” Taken by the author herself as the epilogue to *Chuanqi*, “Days and Nights of China” delivers the message of Zhang’s obsession with China, which is connected to the psychology of decadence.

While C.T. Hsia declares that many modern Chinese writers suffer from their obsession with China, Zhang is, however, excluded from this group as her obsession does not involve the same patriotic passion which instigates her contemporary writers to build up expectations for the betterment of China.

Zhang’s obsession with China features the dilemma where she vacillates between her repulsion against the depravity of China and her attachment to a country she is emotionally indebted to. The result is her indulgence in the decline of China, which gives rise to her decadent inclination. It marks Zhang’s contradictory mentality of being reluctant to detach herself from the place that disappoints her.

The contradiction, on the one hand, inspires her to nourish her works with the treasures of Chinese literary tradition and contribute to the achievements of her literary career. On the other, it also illustrates the predicament characters in *Chuanqi* get into. Unable to leave the circumstances that harrow them, be it a patriarchal society where women are void of self-identity, or the reality which brings all fantasies to disillusionment, or the interpersonal relationships which deny the compatibility of ideologies and the mutual understanding between people, these characters live through the insoluble conflict between the disciplines of human civilization and the requirements of their primitive desires. The conflict, given its presence in the prologue of *Chuanqi*, will become the main argument in the conclusion of this thesis.

## 1. Modern Chinese Writers' Obsession with China

In his essay "Obsession with China: The Moral Burden of Modern Chinese Literature," C. T. Hsia deals with the obsessive concerns about China that are ingrained in the works of most modern Chinese writers. He argues that all the major writers of this modern phase—between the traditional Chinese literature that precedes it and the Communist literature that immediately follows—"are enkindled with this patriotic passion" which derives from their reflection of "China as a nation afflicted with a spiritual disease and therefore unable to strengthen itself or change its set ways of inhumanity" (*A History of Modern Chinese Fiction* 533-534). Accordingly, the obsession with China that haunts modern Chinese writers registers the Chinese intellectual's worry about the decline of the nation, "a new self-awareness brought about by the long series of defeats and humiliations they have suffered since the mid-nineteenth century." Moreover, it also betrays their pressing attentions to humanitarianism as they denounce "the shame" that has been "visited upon" China due to its "moral bankruptcy, its callous unconcern with human dignity and human suffering" (534).

The modern Chinese writers share with their western contemporaries the disgust with the degradation of their countries, which, however, does not put them "in the mainstream of modern literature" (Hsia, *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction* 536). As Hsia points out, the failure of the Chinese writers to earn international applause also hinges on their obsession with China. When the western writer "automatically identifies the sick states of his country with the state of man in the modern world," the Chinese writer, though also probing the "spiritual sickness" of his country, does not extend his vision beyond China. "The Chinese writer sees the conditions of China as peculiarly Chinese and not applicable elsewhere"(536). The limit of his vision determines the limit of his achievements. Denied the laurel of universally renowned authors, the Chinese writer is also blamed for a conceptual mistake. While he "spares no pains to depict its squalor and corruption," he "leaves the door open for hope, for the importation of modern Western or Soviet ideas and systems that would transform his country from its present state of decadence" (536). In other words, his reluctance to "equate the Chinese scene with the condition of modern man" (536) is nourished by his fantasy about the power of western civilization. To repudiate the validity and efficaciousness of practicing the modern western systems "would have blotted out hope for the betterment of life, for restoration of human dignity." As a result, "the price he pays for his obsession with China is therefore a certain patriotic provinciality and a naiveté of faith with regard to better conditions elsewhere" (536).

The obsession with China makes the hope for "a wealthy, strong, democratic, and technologically armed China" (535) surge in the heart of modern Chinese writers. The fear of the imminent downfall of China and the intense expectation for the improvement of the country through western means, causes Chinese writers from the late Qing period to the early Republican years, those named in Hsia's essay include Li Ruzhen 李汝珍, Liu E 劉鶚, Lu Xun 魯迅, Yu Dafu 郁達夫, Wen Yiduo 聞一多, Shen Congwen 沈從文 and Lao She 老舍, to relentlessly expose and ruthlessly castigate the dark side of Chinese culture. Their burlesque stories that satirize and reproach the squalid Chinese and the rotten Chinese civilization are the "self-examination" of the "paralytic condition of China." Furthermore, they are also suggestive of the writers' "passion for human dignity and freedom" (543). Their steadfast faith in humanity, on the one hand, allows modern Chinese writers to "partake of the modern spirit" (554) that accuses the modern world of its impersonal environment. On the other, it fortifies Lu Xun and Lao She's "indictment of China as a cannibalistic society" (545). What is implied here is that the writer's quest and requirement for humanitarianism contribute to their literary accomplishments but also lead to their disdain and detestation of China.

## 2. Zhang Ailing's Obsession with China in "Days and Nights of China"

Hsia's definition of modern Chinese writers' obsession with China serves to be a touchstone with which we can measure the obsession with China in Zhang Ailing's works. It turns out that Zhang's obsession with China falls outside of the category of Hsia's account, despite the fact that she is also well-known for her portrayal and mocking of the negative mentality of the Chinese. However, Zhang rarely evinces the "peculiar interest for [...] obsessive patriotism" (534) that motivates many of her contemporaries to lash out at the vileness of Chinese culture. In contrast, her works are liable to criticism for being nothing more than exposés of the depravity of the Chinese. The critic Fu Lei, under the penname Xun Yu 迅雨, launched one of the severest attacks on Zhang's stories. In the frequently quoted essay "On the Fiction of Zhang Ailing," he points out that what jeopardizes the further achievement of her literary career is the meager content over which the author attempts to gloss her high degree of proficiency in the language. The meagerness comes from the monotonous themes which evolve into a world of cowardliness, inertia and nihilism:

> Love and marriage is the author's central theme, at least up to now. These six or seven short or long works are but VARIATIONS UPON A THEME [in English in the original]. Old fogies and leftovers from the old dynasty,

> and petty bourgeois—they are all pestered by this nightmare of a romantic problem between man and woman. And in this nightmare it's always autumn, with its rainy drizzle, wet, gray, dirty, and with the suffocating smell of decay, like the room of a dying patient... The nightmares are boundless, and hence there is no escape. And those piecemeal trials and the tribulations of life and death are nothing but an unnamable waste. Youth, passion, fantasy, hope can find no place...and on top of it all there is a gigantic hand beyond one's vision, opening its palm and crashing down from nowhere on everyone's heart. Such a picture, as printed on bad-quality newsprint with its lines and black-white contrast all besmeared, should convey the same atmosphere as Miss Chang's short stories. (trans. by Leo Ou-fan Lee, in Lee 281)

Fu's blast at Zhang, nevertheless, explains to us why she is excluded from the group of writers indulged in the obsession with China in Hsia's essay. The modern Chinese writers' poignant accusation of China's dehumanization is, to some degree, entertained with the hope, no matter how slim it might be, for the revival of the glory and dignity of the country. But Zhang allows her characters to be devoured by a nightmarish world as all their struggles and counterattacks come to no avail. Fu Lei is obviously so discomforted by this "wet, grey, dirty" and "suffocating smell of decay" that he compares her art of literature to "the silent stagnancy without any wave of change" (12). Zhang does not sow any seed of expectancy for the betterment of China in her works. In terms of its patriotic orientation, the stories in *Chuanqi* are simply below standard.

Neither does Zhang dwell upon the promise of western civilization and take it as the panacea for China's spiritual illness. In her biographical essay, "Intimate

Words," Zhang's disillusionment at western civilization pricks her when there is a rift between her and her mother upon whom Zhang projects all her fantasies about the west. The foreign characters in *Chuanqi* are not rendered nobler images than those of the Chinese. Roger Upton, the British professor in "Aloe Ashes—The Second Burning," is described to be a mediocre and somewhat banal middle-aged man whose fascination with a virgin girl incurs his suicide. In "In the Years of Youth," the Russian girl Cynthia, with a plain face and flippant attitude toward tidiness, gets married for the sake of marriage, obviously lacking the serious and careful concern towards matrimony. Ah Xiao's employer, Grater, characteristic of a miserly debauchee, is even more debased and despicable. Even Tong Zhenbao, the ambitious Chinese who studies in England as an attempt to be superior to his countrymen, is actually a man who commits adultery and visits prostitutes, full of lust that his western education does not rid him of. In Zhang's stories, the Oriental and the Occidental bear the same weight of deficiencies, absurdities and frustrations. Impervious to the sentimental passion for patriotism and immune from the irrational worship for western civilization, Zhang brews her own obsession with China in the essay "Days and Nights of China."

On the last page of the enlarged version of *Chuanqi*, Zhang provides a note entitled "You Jijuhua Tong Duzhe Shuo" 有幾句話同讀者說 (Some Words for My Readers), where she defines "Days and Nights of China" as the epilogue for the book:

> I can't compose poems. However, last winter, I did compose two which I favor a lot. But I am worried that readers might feel that it is difficult to understand them. My initial intention was to write some words for explanation, but finally it turned out to be an essay. Now I have put the essay, "Days and Nights of China," at the end of the book to be its

> epilogue. Though it does not speak for the background of many of the stories in this collection, it can still serve to be the lingering aroma of these unfinished romances. (*Chuanqi Zengdingben*)

As the epilogue of *Chuanqi*, "Days and Nights of China" does not faithfully parrot the contents of these short stories. Zhang has the full awareness to use the term "lingering aroma" to inform readers that this essay is an extension of the concerns she intended to illuminate in these stories. Therefore, to survey the epilogue is not only to locate Zhang's obsession with China, but also to attain a panoramic view and a conclusive perception of *Chuanqi.*

### 3. *Yi Shi Xie Xu* and *Wuhua Cangliang*

"Days and Nights of China" is a delineation of what Zhang observed when doing some shopping in the market and on her way home. What arrests our attention at first is still its density of secularity, the keynote that is handed down from "The Religion of the Chinese" to this article. The idea of secularization is closely related to Chinese people's emphasis on the material part of life, and, in this essay, the materialistic elements are constructed by Zhang's writing technique of *yishi xiexu* 以實寫虛. The term refers to the unique skill of describing an abstract concept, atmosphere, or feeling in terms of materialistic symbols (Xu Zidong 149-62). The account of the views around the market best demonstrates this technique:

> Another time, I went to the vegetable market when it was already winter time. The sun was dazzlingly bright, but there was a damp, clean smell in the air like freshly washed laundry hanging in a neat array from a bamboo pole. The colors and patterns of the padded cotton gowns of two children

> wobbling somewhere around my feet had a certain similarity: one was the color of salted vegetables, the other of soy pickles, and both were covered with a deep, dark oily stain formed of innumerable smaller stains across the front, resembling the proverbial embroidered sack in which Guan Gong, the god of war, keeps his beard below his chin. (*Written on Water* 214)

The smell of air crystallizes into an image of "freshly washed laundry hanging in a neat array from a bamboo pole." Readers can readily get the message of the moist and clear scent the laundered clothes delivers. The color of the children's dresses is compared respectively to "salted vegetables" and "soy pickles," while the oily stains across their front are likened to "the proverbial embroidered sack in which Guan Gong [...] keeps his beard below his chin." The perception of colors that depends upon the abstract reflection of one's experience is now connected to "salted vegetables," "soy pickles" and "the embroidered sack," the palpable objects we encounter in everyday life. The sensations of smell and vision, intangible and indefinable, are thus embodied within the company of these concrete analogies.

The materialistic symbols also apply to the delicate depictions of food that captivate Zhang:

> The shopping basket of a servant woman coming back from market is full of coils of silver vermicelli noodles, like the unkempt hair of an old woman. There is another woman contentedly holding a crimson-lacquered tray piled with "longevity noodles" that are ingeniously folded into different layers, each suspended above the other. The bundle of noodles at the top is of a little girl's ponytail. The pale rice-colored tresses dangle below, each strand as thick as a little snake. (*Written on Water* 216)

The "silver vermicelli noodles" copies the picture of "the unkempt hair of an old woman," and a bundle of noodles simulates "a little girl's ponytail," each strand of tresses dangling below which imitate "a little snake." At this point, the skill of *yi shi xie xu* changes into that of *yi shi xie shi* 以實寫實, to signify the real life objects with the signifiers derived from reality. The food being connected to these material symbols suggests the depth of materialism rooted in the act of eating. In her essay "Tan Chi yu Huabing Chongji"談吃與畫餅充飢 (Talks about Eating and Satisfying One's Hunger with Picture Cakes), Zhang expresses an unabashed passion for food. As she remarks, "the Chinese are greedy for food, and I am pretty proud of it, because this is the most basic art of living" (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 13,* 35). Zhang's claim translates the ever-insatiable appetite for food, usually stigmatized as the primitive nature of the uncultivated mind, into an elemental joy of life. In "Demons and Fairies," it has already been noted that Chinese literature "finds joy only in materialistic details, which explains why traditional novelists dwell so tirelessly on the unabridged items in meals and love-making (complete menus are often given for no specific purpose)" (421). Thus, the epicurean quality of the Chinese testifies to their fondness for the materialistic aspects of life. In this paragraph, the portrayals of food also accentuate the material life upon which the secular world pivots.

The skills of *yi shi xie xu* and *yi shi xie shi* bring to the fore the concept of *wuhua cangliang* 物化蒼涼 (materializing the desolate). This term, coined by Xu Zidong, points out the paradox of Zhang's personality: on the one hand, she is "highly susceptible to the sense of desolation." On the other, however, she is "afraid of bearing the desolation alone" (Xu Zidong 161). Xu observes that:

> other writers debunk the beautiful deceit of life in order to face the abject

> truth. As for Zhang Ailing, even if she has realized the desolate nature of life, she still clings to the faked beauty [...]. Others will transcend the insensitivity caused by the vulgar descriptions of lanterns, crowds, and products, and then attain a state of nihilistic desolation. For Zhang Ailing, it is just because life is so empty that she has to entertain herself with the paltry objects within her reach. (159)

Xu's remarks are warranted by Wang Anyi 王安憶 who assumes that the secularization of Zhang's works is to rescue her from the abyss of nihilism. In the essay "Xunzhao Su Qing"尋找蘇青 (In Search of Su Qing), Wang specifies the disparity of secularity that is displayed in the works of both Su Qing and Zhang Ailing:

> Zhang Ailing learns to appreciate the details of life too. But her appreciation is a string of straw that salvages her from emptiness and retains her in the earthly world. Su Qing, nevertheless, does not suffer the massive intimidation of nihilism. At most, she is but disappointed at life. What causes her disappointment can be traced back to definite people and events. There is always a reason for her dejection. But Zhang's grief comes from nowhere. It emerges in a vast patch of mistiness. (14)

### 4. The Secularity in Zhang's Works

The quotation from Wang's long prologue to the new version of Su Qing's novel *Jiehun Shinian* 結婚十年 (Married for Ten Years) leaves room for further elaboration. But the key point that differentiates the two female writers rising to fame when

Shanghai is occupied by Japan is more than obvious: their perception of nihilism. Though both of their works are greatly concerned about mundane affairs, Su Qing is more sanguine about life than Zhang. Wang's parallel between Zhang Ailing and Su Qing makes discernible the sadness that looms surreptitiously under the surface of Zhang's zealous devotion to the physical world:

> She [Su Qing] can see through life. So does Zhang Ailing. To take off the veil of life, Zhang discovers nothing but the verse from *The Book of Songs*, "Life, Death, Separation." From the vacancy of life there emerges a poetic sentiment. She realizes that people are so helpless and devoid of any choice when dealing with life. In this melancholy mood there is a feeling mixed of grief and joy. The feeling comes from a man dwarfed by the imposing vastness and grandeur of the cosmos. His grief reaches the peak and then transforms into joy. Su Qing, however, sees through life but her attentions still go back to life. Aware that life is discouraging, she engages herself only in things that interest her. Aware that human beings are restricted by reality, she socializes within the boundary of life. Aware that it is impossible to maneuver other people, she maneuvers herself. All her deeds result from a clear understanding of life, and also from compromises. Zhang Ailing is in despair, but Su Qing refuses to succumb to despair. (A. Wang 9-10)

While Su Qing plants her feet on the solid ground to taste the sweetness and bitterness of life, Zhang's relish for life, nevertheless, merely confirms her passivity and pessimism. Once contributing an essay to provide her views on Su Qing, Zhang is unreserved in announcing her affinity to this woman of the same trade as hers, a woman who has "the strong and basic fondness of life" and who "always holds a romantic attitude toward life, no matter what kind of adversities she is confronted with" (Zhang, *Zhang Ailing Quanji 6,* 89, 92). So resilient in recovering from frustration, Su Qing rarely surrenders to stark disillusionment, the pragmatic pliability Zhang is simply incapable of. With the stories about the hustle and bustle of the secular world, about the tears and laughter of ordinary people, Zhang can at least parry the bleakness of nihilism.

Therefore, the relief that comes from the pleasure in materialism is temporary but unreliable since it perches on the woe of desolate emptiness. Zhang's psychology, suffering from the fear of nothingness, reflects that of the Chinese she defines in "Demons and Fairies." As one of "the Chinese intelligentsia," she is also "staunchly atheistic" and the "agnostic tendency" present both in Chinese literature and in her works renders in her stories "a great sadness" (420). In view of this, we can explain Wang's words that describe Zhang's grief as an amorphous and ambiguous state which emerges only in "a vast patch of mistiness." The hazy patch refers to the blank at the upper portion of the Chinese painting that voices "not a vaporous mass of mystical possibilities, but the absolute arresting of thought" ("Demons and Fairies" 420). The void to which the Chinese find it difficult to apply their emotions returns Zhang to the world of human beings and her attachment to secularity is the access to the essence of her obsession with China.

"Days and Nights of China" is composed of the delineation of scenes alongside the street. In another essay, "Daolu Yimu"道路以目 (Seeing with the Streets), Zhang adopts the same writing style that details to the readers the variety of lives which arrest her attention. Contrary to the expectation of the majority, Zhang claims that the appeal of the daily street sights excels the wonders of exotic spectacles:

> [I]f each time we walk down that street as if it were the first time we had ever seen it, if we see afresh and with new eyes, without succumbing to the blindness of familiarity, we will have done something like walking ten thousand miles, without even sailing the four seas.
>
> There are a lot of things worth looking at on the streets [...].
>
> Little restaurants will often cook pumpkins just outside the front door, and while you couldn't really say that it's a nice smell, the hot pumpkin steam and their "eye-brightening" red imparts a sense "warmth for the old and comfort for the humble" to those who pass by. On cold mornings, there are usually people squatting on the sidewalk lightening little braziers, sending forth billows of white smoke as they fan the flames to life. I like to walk through that smoke. There is similarly sweet, warm, and overpowering smell just outside the gates of the yards where they store coal briquettes for delivery and in front of garages. (*Written on Water* 58)

What alerts us to this passage is Zhang's subtle and sensitive portrayals of the common views such as the smell and color of pumpkins and the burning braziers, the former being connected to the senses of steaming comfort while the latter exhaling the smoke that is sweet and warm. It is her talent to extract from the prosaic daily trifles the poetic sentiment of life that dawns upon us how Zhang nestles her heart within the mundane world. Under her observation, every inch of the street delivers the joy of life available to everyone.

Whatever the sight that arouses her interest, Zhang's affinity to people remains central in her concerns about life. She is especially drawn to imperfect music simply because “when one’s technique has yet to be perfected, struggle, anxiety, disorder, and adventure predominate, and the human element remains strong.” There is “the sound of humanity” that is “‘always about to reveal itself’” (*Written on Water* 63). The effort to comprehend Zhang’s logic in cherishing “the sound of humanity” which tells how human beings struggle to survive will finally lead to the discovery that her praise of the delightfulness of life is always laid upon an emotional foundation of destined disappointment. Aware and convinced that life is plagued by its imperfection and dissatisfaction, Zhang soothes herself with the lyrical beauties that run so incongruously with the world of un-fulfillment. The essay ends with the following passage in which a glance at a boy squatting on the side of the road solicits from Zhang a slightly far-fetched but genuine pathos:

> One night as I walked along a desolate street, I heard a song about roasting gingko nuts: “Sweet so sweet and sticky sticky, too.” It was a boy about ten years old who was singing, and he had yet really to learn the song by heart so as to be able to sing it with conviction. I cannot forget that dark, gloomy, long avenue, with the boy besides his wok, kneeling on the ground, chest lit up by the light of the fire. (*Written on Water* 63)

It will be unconvincingly sentimental to stir one’s heart with the image of an unknown boy if the contrast between the light of fire and the dark and gloomy avenue is not provided. With the foil of a desolate street which presents the solitude and destitution of the world, “the sound of humanity” is crystallized into a boy’s singing that chants the relish of food. Moreover, the blaze that lights up his chest helps to dissipate the bleakness of the night and rekindle Zhang’s affection for life.

The theme of a desolate world sparkling with consolations derived from "the human element" recurs in "Days and Nights of China" when the songs of Chinese vernacular operas emerge:

> At the next door, Shanghainese *shenqu* songs pour volubly from the wireless, also deliberating endlessly on the long and short of various family affairs. First, a woman speaks her piece, and then a man immediately chimes in with a loud and liquid aria of his own: "A man of my years isn't getting any younger....If some untoward event should send me to the netherworld, who will be there to see me on my way?" I love to listen, my ears like fish in water, swimming in the music of his words. Turning the corner, the street suddenly becomes bleak. There is a red wall directly ahead, bricks painted in large clumsy white characters edged in blue with the name of a elementary school. Inside the campus grows a profusion of tall and desolate white trees. The gleaming white sky behind them turns the slightly slanted trunks a pale green. The radio is still playing *shenqu*, but the lyrics are no longer audible. I remember the lyrics from the beginning of a song cycle that I once read in a songbook: "With the first drum beat from the watchtower, the world falls quiet....The tower is dark when the second watch sounds....At the third watch, the tower is even more desolate...." The tone of the first line is imposingly grand, and I am very fond of the majestic images it calls to mind: of the China that has come down to us from the empires of the Han and Tang, of cities lit by a multitude of lamps slowly falling quiet with the sound of a drum. (*Written on Water* 217)

The songs that recount the "family affairs" so pleasant to Zhang's ears is abruptly confronted with the scene of a bleak street. Songs of domestic gossip fade away in the "desolate white trees" and the "gleaming white sky." Wherever "the sound of humanity" cannot reach, the world turns into an abode of bleakness and desolation, against which Zhang tries to defend herself with the recollection of lyrics from a song cycle. The first line that inspires her to envision millions of lamps irradiating the majestic Han and Tang dynasties brings Zhang back to the mundane life. The light of each household recites the story of people annoyed by their trivial worries which compose the *shenqu* songs.

### 5. Detailed Writings and the Sense of Desolation

The amorphous threat of desolation (*cangliang* 蒼涼) that often registers the murky mood of Zhang's works is brought into existence through her unique description of details. In "Days and Nights of China," Zhang approaches the petty urban folks who dominate the frame of the street scene by bringing to the foreground her refined sketches of their features:

> The hands of the apprentice in the butcher shop are swollen with cold. If your glance darts toward him as he noisily minces meat with a cleaver, it looks like he's chopping his own red, swollen fingers. A woman stands outside the counter, a prostitute who's no longer young, perhaps a madam in her own right or just doing business with a few other ladies of the same type. She still perms the hair, which sweeps behind her ears in a puffy cloud. Her face bears the traces of her former beauty, without scar or blemish, but still looks somehow pitted and uneven, and a little hesitant. She has a gold tooth, a black silk gown with rolled-up sleeves, and the

> loose threads of the worn sheepskin on the sleeves cling together in little petals of cloth, like white "maiden crab" chrysanthemums. She asks for a half pound of pork, but the apprentice busies himself with his mincing, and it is unclear whether he simply didn't hear what she said or is deliberately ignoring her. An uncertain smile moves across her face, and she stands outside the entrance, lifting her hands to straighten the tassels on her sleeves, revealing two golden rings and the bright red polish on her nails. (*Written on Water* 216)

Zhang's curiosity over the plebeian, at this point, displays itself in a nuanced dissection of the movements and lineaments of an apprentice and an aging prostitute. The meticulous depictions of the characters accomplish a portrait painting where the exquisite elaboration of either the butcher's hand or the woman's face remind us of the rhetoric of details proposed by Rey Chow.

In her book, *Woman and Chinese Modernity*, Chow argues that "details are here defined as the sensuous, trivial, and superfluous textual presence that exist in an ambiguous relation with some larger 'vision' such as reform and revolution, which seeks to subordinate them but which is displaced by their surprising returns" (85). The narration of details is connected to the concepts of physical sense, to things of little importance, and to the unnecessary words that glut works of literature. The result is the "deep and ideological 'leftovers' embedded in narratives" (Chow 85). Accordingly, the detailed descriptions flood Zhang's works with trivial and disposable subjects. However, what is posed as "leftovers" in contrast to the issues of reform and revolution evokes a sense of rebellion against the chauvinist vehemence shared by other modern Chinese writers in the hopes of the prosperity of their country. When it comes to the obsession with China, Zhang offers a rather different perspective.

In one of her letters of correspondence with C.T. Hsia, Zhang gives the reason why her works remain unnoticed among American readers. As she confesses, "to those who are especially fascinated with the Oriental, my writing serves precisely to disenchant the Oriental lure that haunts them" (Hsia, "Zhang Ailing Geiwo de Xinjian Wu" 70). The following remark that appears in "Aloe Ashes—The First Burning" best demonstrates the image of China that appeals to its foreign visitors. "The presence of this touch of oriental color is obviously meant for foreigners. The English came from far away to take a look at China, and we must give them a China to look at—a China in Western eyes: exotic, delicate, ludicrous" (trans. by Leo Ou-fan Lee in Lee 324). If China as a country full of exotic glamour and delicate furnishings that creates amusement is only a delusion, Zhang's works are equipped with an attempt to debunk the fakeness of this "Chinoiserie." Consequently, the elements that are unveiled and which unnerve her American readers:

> are the central focus in the fictional writings of Eileen Chang [Zhang Ailing], in which an alternative approach to modernity and history arises through a release of sensual details whose emotional backdrop is often that of entrapment, destruction, and desolation. The combination of the detailed and the sensuous with such an emotional backdrop offers an understanding of culture that is defined through powerfully negative affect. (Chow 85)

Details lock the readers in a world full of verbose descriptions of materials, but why is this world swamped in decline and degeneration? How do the sensuous images lead to a state of "entrapment, destruction and desolation"?

The critic, Peng Xiuzhen 彭秀貞, recommends another reading of Zhang's narrative device of using details, which happens to answer these questions. As far as Peng is concerned, the detailed writing functions to preserve the disappeared resplendence belonging to bygone days. She notes that "Zhang relies on detailed delineations that draw a picture of the gorgeous but gloomy past" (Peng 295) because:

> details are loaded with the memories of the past. They stop the flow of time and store them in a spatial dimension. They condense and freeze the beauty and decadence of the tradition and civilization in concrete and materialistic objects [...].
>
> In this freezer, the lost days or ages, together with their smell and temperature, are isolated and exempt from the vicissitudes of time. These detailed images that freeze the flow of time trigger a sensual experience which disturbs the narratives in Zhang's fictional writings and puts the readers off. (Peng 295)

The detailed portrayals of the sensuous touch of furniture, attires, accessories and decorations that tell the story of the past renounce the progress of time, place readers in an anachronistic atmosphere and make them sigh for what has once been magnificent but now dead.

## 6. Anachronism

Anachronism suggests that the cognition of time is deprived of its validity and usefulness. Zhang gives the profile of a Taoist monk to imply that the clock in the days and nights of China runs with a rhythm of its own and encloses in its ticking sounds a world which denies any change and is contented with its blight:

> There is a Taoist monk who walks the streets begging for alms, clad in a great adept's cloak made of faded black cloth [...]. He holds a length of bamboo at an angle, beating out a slow rhythm with a mallet: "Tock...tock...tock." This, too, is a kind of clock, but one that measures a different sort of time: the time of sunlight slanting inch by inch across a lonely and ancient temple in the mountains [...]. Don't tell me that "time is worth more than gold." There are those who would sell their entire lives for a bowl of rice and find no takers [...]. This Taoist monk has brought their worthless spare time into the high-speed bustle of the metropolis. Around him is a riotous profusion of advertisements, store fronts, the honking of automobile horns. He is the fabled dreamer of the dream of yellow millet, but he has awoken from his nap without actually having the dream—and feels an altogether different kind of emptiness. The Taoist walks over to the door of a hardware store and prostrates himself, but naturally they have nothing to give him, so he merely makes a kowtow to no one in particular. Having clambered back up to his feet, the "tock...tock...tock" resumes, and he crosses over to the cigarette stand next door and once again "makes obeisance to the earthy dust," kowtowing crookedly, his movements like the slow ooze of black water or the lazy bloom of a black chrysanthemum flower. To watch him is to feel that the dust of this world is piling ever higher, to know that not only will hopes turn to ash but anything and everything one touches will ultimately crumble to nothingness. (*Written on Water* 215-16)

This lengthy quotation from "Days and Nights of China" carries "a Taoist parable in which a man lives an entire lifetime—brimming with intrigue, romances, worldly success, and failure—only to find upon awakening that it was all merely a dream" (Andrew Jones in *Written on Water* 215). The Taoist monk, taking the role of the fabled dreamer, is an "anachronistic figure" (Lee 341) roaming around a world of modern facilities. But with the "tock" sounds of his bamboo clock that sprawl all over, "the dust of this world" soon shadows the glittering metropolis. Hopes end in ashes, and everything results in nothing. The urban city is enshrouded by the bleakness of "a lonely and ancient temple in the mountains," the image of a remote place belonging to a distant past. At this point, the flow of time freezes. The development of civilization becomes null. The gap between two different periods before and after his nap is bridged. The sense of "emptiness" which creeps out of the monk's dreamless nap keeps gnawing on "this street-corner society" (Lee 270). The connotation of this parable points at the dreamlike quality of life. All of one's pursuits, triumphs and frustrations are transient and ephemeral. So is the prosperity of China. If all the splendors are destined to be gone with the wind, what is left in this view of drowsy aimlessness is "the image of China in the author's mind which looks so murky, desolate and full of ambiguity because even if there are occasional visits of sunshine, they are uncertain and impermanent" (J. Zhang, *Zhang Ailing Xinlun* 88-89).

Zhang's obsession with China is identified with the fact that while other writers still harbor the hope for the resurgence of China as a grand nation, she casts her doubt on the simplistic optimism adopted by some Chinese literati. As the dream for China's future is so unpredictable and illusionary, the glory of lost days is more amiable because it provides an immediate and trustworthy solace. In this epilogue, the modern spirit of China is corroded by its redundant antiquity that is charged with moral degradation. However, rather than brandishing the banner of patriotism to steer China into a brighter future, Zhang weds her passion to a contemporary China that still snuggles within the debris of its heritage. Her nostalgia for tradition, on the one hand, accounts for her suspicion of the promise of social and cultural reforms. On the other, it steeps her in the negative complexion of "entrapment, destruction and desolation," an aesthetics of decadence.

### 7. Decadence

The tenor of the theory of decadence refers to "the motifs of decay, corruption and hopelessness. But at the same time there is an indulgent feeling of inertia inseparable from one's weariness and sophistication. In her fiction and essays, Zhang provides a keen insight into both states of mind: the decadent and the indulgent" (Nan Fangshuo). The paradox about the relationship between "weariness" and "sophistication" is that to have command of the worldly wisdom drives Zhang to be tired of life, because nothing can redeem her from her pessimistic perspective towards humanity. The stories in *Chuanqi* furnish readers with Zhang's sincere but callous examination of how women are fettered and twisted by the identities imposed by men, how the needs of the characters remain unanswered and their dreams all come to naught, and how the incompatible ideologies of people damage their relationships. As Nan Fangshuo claims, when penning these stories, Zhang actually searches for and tries to define the logics of decadence:

> Therefore, the traces of people's fall, the degeneration of human natures, and the portrayals of people who, facing the decline and enduring the torture of unfulfilled desires, prey on each other, afflict each other and destroy each other, all become the themes of her novels [...]. The

> descriptions of her mediocre contemporaries give the impression that their life and love are full of trifles and half measures, impotence and compromises. There also lingers a sense of nihilism which reasons that nothing is everlasting and unchanging.

All these dismal and doleful elements of decadence arrive at the realization that "life with its rich promise and potential as it should be, and life with its squalid reality as it is, provide a poignant contrast that she [Zhang] constantly explores" (Cheng "Themes and Techniques in Eileen Chang's Stories" 179). The feature of "poignant contrast" that distinguishes Zhang's literary career has already been foreshadowed by one of her earliest works ever published, "Tiancai Meng" 天才夢 (Dream of Genius). When lamenting over the conflict between her talent in writing and her inefficiency in dealing with chores, Zhang ends this short essay with the following witticism: "Life is a gorgeous gown, swarming with lice" (trans. by Karen Kingsbury 27). Zhang's precocious intelligence contributes to this augural remark of her lifelong struggles for reconciling the "rich promise and potential" of life, materialized as "a gorgeous gown" that appeals to her, with its "squalid reality," insinuated by a swarm of lice that harrows her. She constantly oscillates between the limbo of hope and despair, and her stories issue a notion that:

> life is pathetic because the reality of the world allows one to harbor so little illusion, while most of us must still stubbornly cling to some form of dream for our survival. Thus most of her characters cherish the golden mean, a middle course designed to meet both their reluctance to face reality and the practical necessity of doing so.

> [...] With all the intrinsic limitations of the human race, there is nevertheless the possibility of happiness, subdued as it may be, should people strive for it. (Cheng, "Themes and Techniques in Eileen Chang's Stories" 179-180)

Zhang's perception of life, as Stephen Cheng illustrates, is incorporated into her obsession with China in light of the "golden mean."

### 8. The Dilemma in the "Golden Mean" and *Cenci de Duizhao*

Aware that China doles out so little fuel to flame her patriotism, Zhang is still unable to disentangle herself from her unreasonable attachment to her homeland. In her essay, "Shi yu Hushuo" 詩與胡說 (Poetry and Nonsense), she pours forth her reluctance to leave China. "And thus living in China has something lovable about it: amid dirt and chaos and grief, one discovers everywhere precious things, things that bring joy for an afternoon, a day, a lifetime [...]. If I were to choose, I could not bear to leave China; I'm homesick even before I leave home" (*Written on Water* 143). Inclined neither to escape from China nor to deprive it of its sickness, Zhang adopts the golden mean to survive "the dirt and chaos and grief" of China by rummaging for something that delights her. The combination of two opposite emotions of grief and joy tells how Zhang, unwilling to separate herself from the decadence of China, finally chooses to indulge in it. The joy distilled from the decadence can be taken as a morbid liking, but, at least, for a writer who is disheartened by the troubled times in which she lives when everyone can only afford to take care of one's own interest (A. Zhang, *Zhang Ailing Quanji 14,* 95), it is a more effective balm than the slogans of nationalism. Beginning "her writing career during the Second World War in the Japanese-occupied city of Shanghai" (Nicole Huang in *Written on Water* IX), Zhang is often discouraged by the looming specter of doom. Her relishing of materialism and her refusal to stake her hopes on the peace and prosperity that may come in the future make Zhang cherish the enjoyment within her grasp at the moment. This explains to us why Zhang, despite the turmoil and decay of modern China, still feels close to her contemporaries. As she once told Hu Lancheng 胡蘭成, "There may be any number of things wrong with modern things, but when all's said and done they are ours, they are akin to us" (Hu 135).

To blend the contrasts between happiness and sorrow and to indulge in decadence, two elements that speak for Zhang's obsession with China, bring our study back to her literary theory of *cenci de duizhao*, which Leo Ou-fan Lee translates as "contrast in de-cadence"(in Lee 280). To inform us how he reaches this unique English translation, Lee makes a lengthy paraphrase of the term:

> To illustrate [*cenci de duizhao*], Chang uses the example of colors: a contrast in "de-cadence" is a contrast between the colors of scallion and peach as compared to the "strong" contrast between red and green, whose effect is more exciting than revealing. A strong contrast gives off a sense of strength, a "de-cadenced" contrast beauty; the former happiness, the latter sorrow. And this feeling use of colors becomes one of the most salient features of her technique [...]. In the story "Traces of Love," Chang gives this subdued mixture a more colorful display: *pale yellow* walls that have turned *dark grey* owing to dampness; charcoal burning from *dark green* to *dark red*; two vases of *dried red* chrysanthemums; rainy weather "like a big *dark brown* dog, fluffy and sticky, its icy-cold *black* nose nudging and sniffing at a human race." Only occasionally do we see a "residual patch of rainbow appearing in a *pale blue* sky, short and straight, in *red, yellow,*

> *purple,* and *orange,*" and even it appears only "in a flash, and rather late." Such a typical sampling, in Chang's view, certainly does not give rise to a feeling of tragic glory (*beizhuang*) or sublime grandeur (*zhuanglie*), which is manifested only in "strong" oppositions and is a characteristic of revolution and war. But Chang prefers the aesthetic state of "cold desolation" (*cangliang*), which can be a "revelation"—an epiphany that discloses a plain truth. (283-84)

What we chisel out of Lee's elaboration is a neat union of two devices that, out of Zhang's own making, are most salient in her works, *cenci de duizhao* and *cangliang*. The concept of *cenci de duizhao*, demonstrated by the contraposition of two colors not polarized to each other on the chromatograph, triggers a sense of *cangliang* "that discloses a plaint truth" of life. In her prologue to the second edition of *Chuanqi*, Zhang has claimed that "the word I use the most in my writing is 'desolation'" (*Written on Water* 199). The sentence that reads like the writer's prophecy proves to be fulfilled not only because we encounter, in the epilogue, words like "desolate" "bleak" and "emptiness" that draw a picture of a forlorn world, but also because, in the end, we finally understand how Zhang applies the idea of *cenci de duizhao* to make her short stories the genuine reflections of the sense of *cangliang*. While *cangliang* attests to Zhang's interpretation of life, *cenci de duizhao* confirms that being addicted to decadence rewards one with joys which do not guarantee absolute happiness but are nevertheless relatively cheerful because the sense of desolation always hovers above.

The joys that come by courtesy of the materialistic and secular streaks of the Chinese repeat themselves near the end of "Days and Nights of China." Coming back from the market and burdened with her shopping, Zhang is seized by a fit of happiness that bears her soulful confessions of love for China:

> I am holding a mesh shopping bag full of cans and bottles. There are two covered ceramic bowls full of tofu and soybean paste that need to be held upright, and a big bundle of cabbage hearts that needs to be kept at an angle so that it doesn't crush the eggs underneath. In short, I can proceed only with the greatest of difficulty. Although the rays of the winter sun are weak, it is noon, and I have walked quite a distance in the sun, so that its beams are like bees buzzing unrelentingly overhead, which makes me break into an itchy sort of sweat. I am truly happy to be walking underneath a Chinese sun. And I like feeling that my hands and legs are young and strong. And all this seems to be connected together, but I don't know why. In these happy moments—the sound of the wireless, the colors of the streets—a portion of all this seems to belong to me, even if what sinks sadly to the ground is also Chinese silt. At bottom, this is China after all. (*Written on Water* 218)

Readers might be bewildered by the unaccountable happiness that catches Zhang had they not been informed of the strong connection between food and materialism in her works. The weight of food, conjuring up the savor for eating that is betrothed to one of the Chinese arts of living, roots her deeply in the silt of China. The glaring sunlight that dazzles her and demands her physical strength also plants her feet on the solid ground of China. The daily activity of shopping delivers to Zhang an enormous delight because it is in her homeland that she experiences the mundane realities of life. The Chinese sun at noon thus functions to melt a stock cube of emotion and flavor the paragraph with Zhang's obsession with China.

### 9. The Contradiction in Zhang's Obsession with China

Zhang choreographs the epilogue by framing it with two poems at the beginning and ending of this piece of writing. The inspiration for the poetry comes upon her after she does some shopping in the market. The first one, entitled "Luoye de Ai" 落葉的愛 (The Love of a Falling Leaf), follows Zhang's attention to delineate the trip of a leaf falling from a tree to the ground:

> The big yellow leaf tumbles down
> slowly, passing by the breeze
> by the pale green sky
> by the knifelike rays of the sun
> and the dusty dreams of yellow-gray apartment buildings.
> As it falls toward the middle of the road
> you can see that it means to kiss
> its own shadow.
> Its shadow on the ground
> reaches out in welcome, reaches out
> and seems also to drift to the side.
> The leaf moves as slowly as can be,
> feigning a middle-aged nonchalance,
> but as soon as it hits the ground
> a hand baked gold by the season
> carefully palms its little black shadow
> as if catching a cricket:
> "Oh, here you are !"

In the autumn sun
on the cement ground
they sleep quietly together
the leaf and its love. (*Written on Water* 213-214)

A poem that looks so irrelevant when compared to its context does manifest Zhang's attachment to China if we compare the falling leaf to the writer herself, who is descending to the ground to kiss "its own shadow," a figurative image of China. The allegory of the leaf and its shadow highlights the inseparable relationship between them.

The inseparability, emblematic of Zhang's indulgence in a decadent China, also touches the dilemma the characters in *Chuanqi* are trapped in. Women, afflicted but still hesitant to break the shackle of the images modeled in a patriarchal society, are loaded with the fear that they can be identified with nothing other than the subjects allotted to them by men. People, suffering from disillusionment, still live with the fantasies which are the projections of their desires, because life will become void if human beings are shorn of the ability to desire for something they can never reach. Being frustrated by disharmonious relationships does not impel the characters to sever their ties with other people, for, without the maneuver of relationships, the Chinese art of living will signify nothing. The inscrutable psychology of getting attached to a situation that keeps agonizing people denotes a "contradiction of embracing something one tries to shove away" (Liao 385). Moreover, it teaches us that "when trying to defy oppression, the writer does not draw a distinct line between the oppressor and herself" (Liao 385). In his essay entitled "Wenming de Yeman" 文明的野蠻 (The Savageness of Civilization), Liao likens civilization to the oppressor that deprives people of their humanity. Following his logic, we can argue that if to disclose the darkness of the Chinese culture is to accuse China of its inhumanity, Zhang is, however, still deeply indebted to the Chinese tradition often observed with sardonic tones in her stories.

The contradiction incurred by the indefinable border between the oppressor and the oppressed ushers us into the debate on the revolution and involution of modern Chinese literature advanced by David Der-wei Wang. As Wang proposes:

> If *revolution* denotes an overcoming through extreme measures of that which is established, *involution*, by contrast, points to an introverted tendency, a move that expands and curls in such a way as to turn inward upon itself. Although often associated with a regressive action in contrast with the progressive development of revolution, involution cannot be equated with reaction, since it does not return to the point of origin, any more than revolution does; it differs from revolution only in that its trajectory is not felt to point ahead, in an optimistically linear direction—indeed, it might be difficult to tell the difference between the two since both continue indefinitely [...]. The resemblance between Chinese literary revolution and Chinese literary involution should never be ignored; this is where modernity took its first Chinese steps. (31-32)

The difference between revolution and involution is determined by the "progressive" and outward motions of the former and the "regressive" and inward actions of the later. These two opposing concepts, however, converge in the history of modern Chinese literature which is actually initiated by their "resemblance." Wang's reasoning of revolution and involution provides no less a contradiction than the one we are confronted with in Zhang's obsession with China. Both are modeled by the uncanny espousal of two values that conflict with each other.

As far as Wang is concerned, the career of literary revolution usually pursued by "mainstream May Fourth writers" faces an ironic result because:

> once they acquired the 'key' to that which they believed to be modern (or just Western?) literature, they were enslaved by their new discoveries and inhibited from creating anything on their own: their borrowings from the West, rather than emancipating them, kept them from the modern. The foreign models are in danger of being assimilated to the lists of classics every child is taught to admire and every writer studies: the very opposite of the spirit of modernity. (35)

In contrast, late Qing writers archived in terms of their "tendency toward involution" that displays "the conservatives' embrace of traditional values" and "a nostalgia for tradition by consciously or unconsciously misreading Western texts in a Chinese way" turn out to be the contributors to the "real change" (Wang 33) in modern Chinese literature. The questions that fall into our concerns are: How does the restoration of Chinese literary heritage inspire in late Qing writers the inventions representative of modernity? How do the revolutionary and involutionary movements cooperate to herald the new era of Chinese literature? And how does Wang's research on the contradictory element of modern Chinese literature lead our study of Zhang's obsession with China into a different dimension?

In their quest for the modernity of Chinese literature, modern Chinese writers, with the impetus of "anti-traditionalism" (Wang 36), are, however, backward-looking:

> Orthodox modern Chinese fiction by the eve of the second Sino-Japanese

> war was dominated by nineteenth-century realism, which is anything but "modern" in a comparative twentieth-century perspective. Despite their pose of anti-traditionalism, modern Chinese writers were actually a rather timid generation pursuing an inherited tradition as if it were new.
>
> Modernity may as well be called conventionality if writers are obliged to conform to one kind of discourse already well exemplified in textbooks. (Wang 36)

The "conventionality" which labels the quality of the generation expecting itself to be the pioneer of modern Chinese literature reveals to us that their painstaking efforts to discard the conventions of China only swamps them in the conventions of the Western literary models they appropriate so well (Wang 35). One also has to keep in mind how much their creativity is marred because they are inclined to this reactionary force. In comparison, the work of late Qing writers is the actual point where two reverse flows of involution and revolution meet.

The markings of modernity that Wang samples in late Qing fiction brings about the conclusion that, on the one hand, "late Qing fiction writers drew ingredients from both the 'noble' genres [...] and the petty genres [...] and incorporated them into their new discourse" (Wang 34). On the other:

> Late Qing writers' "misreadings" of their foreign counterparts [...] resulted in a series of unexpected inventions. The labels late Qing writers conjured up for their works, from adventure novel to detective fiction, from political novel to pathetic novel, give one a foretaste of the imagined (or actual) vitality these writers contributed to the literary scene. The political novel

> aside, the possibilities nurtured by late Qing writers could have formed a very different constellation of modern Chinese literature [...]. Insofar as involution implies a capacity to generate differences and complexities while remaining inside one's own time and space, this model of late Qing fiction might serve as a perspective from which to re-examine modern Chinese literature as a whole. (Wang 35-36)

In other words, the late Qing writers are enlightened by the precious relics of the "vernacular narrative tradition" (Wang 34) to enrich their discourses, while their interpretation of foreign texts also impinges on the variety of their genres. The multiplicity of the writer's individual responses to different literary texts allows us to see the sprouting of modernity in Chinese literature. Wang's re-evaluation of the works of late Qing writers suggests that their negotiation with the antithetical notions of tradition and modernity brings in the harvest of groundbreaking achievements.

The debate on revolution and involution finally touches the issue of the obsession of China. As Wang observes:

> The phrase that so well describes Chinese literature of the twentieth century, "obsession with China," succeeds because it papers over differences whether this obsession is to be explained as an approved posture to be adopted by every realist everywhere (not to rest until one's native land is modern) or as an unending pursuit of an always elusive homeland (the involuted quest for an unobtainable origin). (36)

Two kinds of obsession defined in this passage can be respectively referred to the revolutionary literati who are bewitched by their passion for China's modernization, and to the involutionary ones who express their "nostalgia for tradition" (Wang 33) more directly. Despite their contrastive literary movements, both are, nevertheless, hosts for the obsession with China. Wang's comparison between late Qing writers and May Fourth writers invites us to draw another parallel between Zhang Ailing and those modern Chinese writers whom C. T. Hsia considers to be the victims of their obsession with China.

If we ruminate about Hsia's comment that it is because of their obsession with China that the modern Chinese writers are inflicted with "a certain patriotic provinciality" (Hsia 536) which hinders them from claiming their positions in world literature, Wang's research, however, provides us with one reason to reverse Hsia's viewpoint. The May Fourth writers who sacrifice their talents to mimicry of Western literary works in the hope of reforming and renovating Chinese literature are ultimately devoured by their Western imports. However, modern Chinese writers are "denial of universality" (537) not because of their addictive concerns towards China's spiritual disease but because of their wishful thinking to eradicate the disease by adopting Western theories and systems. Hsia asserts that if they dare to "equate the Chinese scene with the condition of modern man" and consume themselves "with the passion of Dostoevsky or Tolstoy, of Conrad or Mann, to probe the illness of modern civilization," they would have already "been in the mainstream of modern literature" (536). I would rather assume that it is their fanatical condemnation of the poison of Chinese heritage that makes them too ready to prostrate themselves to whatever is the opposite of China. Had they allowed themselves to appreciate the treasures of their tradition, they would have been rewarded with the achievements that late Qing writers attained. Thus, it is fair to say that Zhang's vacillation between despair and delight about China exiles her from the group of those obsessed with China.

Whether the ostracism also exempts Zhang from the "provinciality" and therefore registers her works in the list of world-class literature is still open to debate. But, she has at least presented a unique pattern of her obsession with China, illustrated in the following poem that brings this epilogue to a close:

**Days and Nights of China**

My road passes
across the land of my country
Everywhere the chaos of my own people;
patched and patched once more, joined and joined again,
a people of patched and colored clouds.
My people,
my youth.
I am truly happy to bask in the sun back from market,
weighed down by my three meals for the day.
The first drumbeats from the watchtower settle all under heaven,
quieting the hearts of people;
the uneasy clamor of voices begins to sink,
sink to the bottom…
China, after all. (*Written on Water* 218)

Readers find in this poem a world rich with the juxtapositions of noises of clamors and the quietness of the hearts of people, of the happiness to tread on the soil of China and the sadness that sinks China to the bottom. The contrasts imbedded in these lines speak of the unresolved contradiction in the poet's mind. Zhang's obsession with China is always characteristic of its ambiguity that locates her emotion in the twilight zone between attachment and disappointment. Moreover, the simile that compares the Chinese to a "people of patched and colored clouds" is related to the fable Zhang mentions earlier in this article, that about "the goddess Nüwa" (*Written on Water* 214) who patches up the broken sky. The allusion to this national mythology in this poem serves as Zhang's "return to native Chinese sources for intellectual nourishment." The crisscross of the Chinese tradition and "the urban cultural environment in which she lived" demonstrates that "in Chang's 'intellectual' background, tradition and modernity are always juxtaposed in ways never anticipated by the [...] conductors of the May Fourth movement" (Lee 288).

What, then, is the literary scene that "the conductors of the May Fourth movement" never anticipate? The final words of the poem which implicate the inevitable doom of China picture an image of a fallen and gloomy country, the illumination of "Zhang's brimming pessimism about China" (J. Zhang, *Zhang Ailing Xinlun* 85). Moreover, the notion of the temporal movement in this poem also deserves further exploration. With the reference to the mythological story set in the time when the world just begins, Zhang strides across millions of years and brings ancient China to her contemporaries. The poem spans antiquity to modernity, and the sigh for China's sinking extends from the past to the present. What looms up is the fate of the everlasting decadence of an old nation. C. T. Hsia argues that the representative western writer wins universal applause because he links the background of his works to "the impersonal environment of modern man that has made possible this modern literature of nihilism and irrationality" (536). Zhang, instead, reaches the same universality not by the unanimous description of the spiritual epidemic that crosses the borders of different nations, but by the eternity of the decadent civilization that sails through the waves of different ages. Still, the concerns of her writings are "peculiarly Chinese" (536), but on condition that her obsession with China goes along with the history of China, readers of different times can always learn to share the laughter and tears with her characters. At the end of her essay, "Whispers," Zhang renders another juxtaposition of the ancient and modern worlds:

> Having arrived at this point in the essay, the breeze at my back blows a bit more chill, so I stand by the glass doors and gaze out from the balcony at a drizzle of yellow moonlight. Night in ancient times was punctuated by the beating of drums. Now, we have the wooden clappers of wonton vendors. For a thousand years, the dreams of countless multitudes measured out by the same beat—tock, tock, tock, tock: what lovable yet miserable times! (*Written on Water* 161)

Is Zhang, as Leo Ou-fan Lee claims, performing "the reincarnated role of that Daoist priest" (341), who strolls around the metropolis of Shanghai with the sounds of "tock" from her bamboo clock? Or is she rather one of the "countless multitudes" who, mesmerized by "the beating of drums" and awakened by "the wooden clappers," is reciting the "lovable yet miserable" stories of her dreams to her readers?

# Conclusion

I have been steeped in the writings of Zhang since I was in senior high, and witnessed the surge in the popularity of her works in the reading public and in academic circles especially during the first few years following her death in 1995. A tendency that concerns me a lot is the increasing efforts of readers, writers or scholars to establish the myth of Zhang Ailing by exploiting her anecdotes and romances to cloak the writer in a mysterious shadow. Others attempt to re-create the historical and geographical atmosphere of Shanghai during the 1940s by guiding the readers to the residences once occupied by Zhang as well as the café, movie theaters, book stalls and restaurants she frequented. Textual research seems to become secondary, or sometimes greeted with the criticisms of being limited and conservative, in the storm aroused by the zest for Zhang.

I will by no means devalue the contextual investigation of the writer and her works. But I always recall the excitement I was showered with the first time I read Zhang's short stories, under circumstances when I knew little about the life of the writer and the historical backdrop of these works. I have, thus, engrossed myself in searching for the elements incubating in her stories which will touch the heart of readers simply, inasmuch as they provide the writer's unique insights into the profundity and complexity of life. This, as far as I am concerned, explains readers' initial craving for literary works. I hereby found the temerity to venture on a thesis which aims to discover one of the possible interpretations of life in *Chuanqi.* The years of working on this thesis have rewarded me with the answer that illustrates how these characters, trying to meet the insatiable demands of their desires which are curbed by civilization, are finally confronted with inevitable tragedies in their lives.

In this thesis, I utilized western literary theories to study Zhang's short stories, an approach which might launch a query, except for being conventional, about justifying the parallel between eastern and western literary texts without regarding the cultural differences. However, the impetus that motivates me to do a theoretical reading of *Chuanqi* is, as it is pointed out in the introduction, to detect the preemptive perceptions which find their resonances in modern literary theories. Moreover, the fact that there is a conceptual connection between a Chinese writer and western theorists tells us how a comparative study can bring forth the universality of a writer's works, on the basis that the distinctiveness of her social and historical background is not assimilated into the token of universality.

The concluding remarks represent a recapitulation of the previous chapters as a review of the main arguments that brought to awareness the conflict between civilization and human desires, and how this conflict became the focus of Eliot's poem, "The Waste Land." I also indicate, in my opinion, the potentials for further research that can be done on this work.

### What Has Been Accomplished Up to Now?

The preface to *Chuanqi* makes notable the concept of desolation, which is not only brought forth by the doom of civilization, but which also implies that civilization itself is a wasteland where the desires of human beings are never fulfilled. From chapter one to chapter three, I applied different literary theories to explore how the characters struggle between the liberation and suppression of their desires.

The feminist reading of *Chuanqi* functioned to lay out the masculine desires projected as three roles for women, that of prostitute, mother and virgin. As far as Irigaray is concerned, our civilization is a patriarchal one because the definition of femininity is conceptualized by men. Deprived of the system of representation, women can only become assimilated into the phallocentric society by enacting men's fantasies about them. The image of the prostitute is connected to the psychology of fetishism. Women who are materially infatuated are themselves one kind of product to be marketed for marriage. The shopping sprees enable women to decorate themselves with gorgeous clothes and dazzling accessories, with the aim to become a visible commodity for men to purchase. Marriage, thus, is considered a trade in which women sell themselves in return for financial security. To merchandise their physical beauty for money engages the fetishist women in the business of prostitution. In *Chuanqi*, the female characters who get married for this reason all belong to the category of the prostitute. The stories of "Love in a Fallen City" and "The Golden Cangue" tell how Baoluo and Chang'an exert every effort to deck themselves out before meeting the men they are supposed to marry. In "Great Felicity," Yuqing indulges herself in buying the trousseau, as she is aware that she will never be allowed to lavish her time and money on shopping once she is a married woman. In "The Glazed Tiles," Mr. Yao picks his sons-in-law as if he is looking for eligible merchants to bid for his presentable daughters. While the marriages of these women are only alluded to as prostitution, the misery, however, actually befalls Ge Weilong, the protagonist in "Aloe Ashes—The First Burning," who sinks into the bog of materialism and ends up being a whore, earning money to provide for her aunt and her prodigal husband. The image of the prostitute denotes a degenerating slide in which women who are lost in the desire for commodities, in turn become commodities themselves.

The role of a mother, as Rey Chow points out, touches on the notion of self-sacrifice. What transpires from the notion is that women as mothers are responsible for reproduction, thus ensuring that a man's family continues. Given that to have and rear children are their first priorities, mothers are obliged to shower their babies with concern and love while their own interests are ignored. The requirement of sacrificing their individuality, nevertheless, antagonizes that of fetishist women, who take on the narcissistic traits as they are devoted to adorning themselves with commodities. To meet the request of self-sacrifice and erase oneself means to deny their right of being a narcissist. The conflict makes women either masochists or sadists. The former are mothers who overstate their sacrifices in order to win sympathy from men, while the latter seek the compensation for their loss of love by taking their revenge on their own children. As a result, the relationship between mothers and daughters turns out to be the one between enemies. Madame Zheng in "A Wilted Flower" pours out her miseries to her daughter's boyfriend, with the hope that the image of a poor mother-in-law can stir a man's emotion. In "The Golden Cangue," Cao Qiqiao becomes the representative of a sadistic mother who preys on the life of her children to lament her deplorable marriage. In "The Heart Sutra," the relationship between Xu Xiaohan and her mother is completely the one between rivals who are engulfed in the battle over Mr. Xu's love. The perverted characters of mothers reflect how women, confronted with the youth and beauty of their daughters, are desperate to restore their identities as desirable products.

Virgins mirror the peremptory desires of the male merchants who, preoccupied with the virginity of women, can announce their ownership over the commodities. Moreover, the dream for a pure and chaste girl implies that when she is sexually innocent, men take the dominant position in sex, without any worry that his wife might ever commit adultery. The child-women in *Chuanqi*, fastidiously prudent in maintaining their virginity, are either ridiculously ignorant of or callously indifferent to sexual intercourse. "Aloe Ashes—The Second Burning" recounts the story of a girl, Susie Mitchell, who, purged of any knowledge of carnal desires, accuses her husband of attempted rape the night of their wedding. Roger, an ordinary professor who only wants to have physical relations with his wife, is beset by the rumors which label him as a sexual pervert and finally commits suicide. In "Red Rose and White Rose," Meng Yanli is described as an ideal wife who, submitted to the virtue of chastity, becomes sexually frigid. Unable to get sexual pleasures from his wife, Tong Zhenbao visits prostitutes as an alternative. As he gradually abandons himself to public flirtations with other women, his affairs smear his image as a righteous man and almost shatter his family. The incarnations of men's fantasies about virginity, however, result in two women whose purity victimizes their husbands. The tragedies of Roger and Zhenbao also suggest how Zhang mocks men's cravings for virgins.

Irigaray's theory tells that women are the reflections of men's desires. Accordingly, to identify themselves with the values of men, women strive to become the object most desirable in a patriarchal society. What grants men the position as a ruling subject is the phallus, which, however, women are biologically deprived of. Instead of being the desiring subject, women compensate for their castration by being the desired object, to endow her body with the equivalent preciousness as that of the phallus and expect the unparalleled love with which men cherish their reproductive organs. Thus, for women, to lose men's love is to be shorn of the importance of their being. The requirement for men's attention is characteristic of the religious commitment, as in both cases she is demanded to efface herself for the love of a powerful idol.

The desire for love helps to explain the misfortunes of many women in *Chuanqi*. Ge Weilong lets slip the chance of escaping from a brothel disguised as her aunt's house as she is overtaken by her passion for the philanderer, George. In "A Wilted Flower," Chuanchang, after suffering from tuberculosis for two years, is informed that her lover is dating another woman. All her aspirations for life become illusions, and she just passes away like a withered flower. In "Red Rose and White Rose," when Yanli is bathed in the dream of martial life, she can see nothing but a rosy future beaming with happiness, though the reality finally disenchants her. In "In the Years of Youth," the Russian girl Cynthia is the only one who, in defiance of the nonchalance of the wedding guests and the flippant attitude of her husband, is blessed by the divine atmosphere of the church, which is connected to the holiness of love. The plot of "Shutdown" is about the school teacher Wu Cuiyuan, who falls in love with a man she meets on the tram when the street is put under a blockade, and experiences all the sweetness of love her drab life will never dole out. However, when the blockade is lifted, their relationship also comes to an end. The happiest moments of her life can only survive in the recesses of her mind. Qiqiao and Chang'an, the antagonistic mother and daughter in "The Golden Cangue," are once consecrated by love. Gripped by the acrimony of her mother, Chang'an harbours no hopes for life and gives herself to opium. Nevertheless, the engagement with Tong Shifang is the only thing that revives her and encourages her to quit. Although her efforts of turning over a new leaf come to no avail, Chang'an still tries to keep the memories of her true love, preserving them in a crystal bottle which reminds her of the most precious part of her life. The ruthlessness of Qiqiao as a mother is transfused with humanity when readers find out how much her love for Jiang Jize excruciates her. After she drives Jize away, with the suspicion that he comes to flirt with her only to swindle her money, Qiqiao rushes upstairs to cast a last glance at the man she has fallen for. Her face is draped with tears, because she is aware that this is the love that will keep tempting her heart for the rest of her life. In "Waiting," Mrs. Xi and Mrs. Tong all suffer from their unhappy marriages as their husbands ignore them for their mistresses. But what they wish for is that one day their husbands will repent their wrongdoings and resume loving them. The title of the story, implying that women spend their life waiting for the love of men, also makes conspicuous women's religious devotion to love.

The masculine civilization transforms men's desires for women into the images of prostitutes, virgins and mothers, which determine the definition of femininity. In *Chuanqi*, women who are disfranchised from creating their own identities and who can only come to terms with the requirements of the roles that embody the fantasies of men undergo psychological distortions, which incur the tragedies of both men and women. However, what is elicited from the desire of men is the desire of women that calls for men's love and that thus subjects itself to men's desires. As a result, it turns out that the devil which captures the female characters and decides their actions is their own desires camouflaged by the desires of men.

The conflict between civilization and desires not only victimizes women but also afflicts men. The Lacanian reading of *Chuanqi* introduced the theory which claims that there is an inevitable disjunction between the signifier and the signified. What is inspired by Lacan's concept is that people articulate their desires in terms of fantasies, while fantasies are condensed and transferred into signifiers which are then imposed upon others. The signifier-takers are expected to fulfil their desires but always fail to accomplish the mission. The mismatch between the signifier and the signified illustrates the disharmony between fantasies and reality. The former insinuates the collapse of the symbolic world, and the latter foreshadows the irrevocable process where desires turn into disillusions. The autobiographical essays by Zhang tell how she had once projected her dreams of the western world onto her mother, a woman characterized by her fashion and independence, usually considered to be the rewards of her education in England. Her fantasies soon betray her, as Zhang witnesses how her idolized mother becomes selfish and irritable when stricken with poverty.

Misery repeats itself in the stories of three male characters in *Chuanqi*. In "The

Jasmine Tea," Nie Chuanqing indulges in the chimerical ideas of replacing his gross father with the professor Yan Ziye, whose image is coined by the signifier of a successful father with a dignifying grace. Chuanqing is disillusioned when Yan Ziye humiliates him because of his absent-mindedness in class, which destroys his pride. "In the Years of Youth" features the young man Pan Ruliang who, in an attempt to distance himself from his family which he regards with little respect, imagines himself to be in love with a Russian girl Cynthia, the emblem of the Promised Land in the foreign country. Ruliang is awakened from his dream when, after a date or two, he finds Cynthia is only a mediocre girl with a plain face who is over oblivious of her untidiness. The title of the story, "Red Rose and White Rose," respectively identifies two women with the signifier of a voluptuous mistress and that of a virtuous wife. The symbols of red rose and white rose explain Tong Zhenbao's desires for women of diametrically opposed qualities. But soon he is confronted with the reality that the mistress, Wang Jiaorui, devotes herself to love and seeks to have a monogamous relationship with him, while his wife, Meng Yanli, stealthily commits adultery with her tailor. As neither of them lives up to the signifiers imposed on them, the symbolic world of Zhenbao thus crumbles. What spells the tragedies of these characters is not only the fact that reality allows so little room for fantasies. But, more poignantly, it is the cultivation of civilization that incubates in our minds the desires for a model family which involves the images of an ideal father or a perfect wife and that provokes us to lay the foundation of our happiness on the dreams that will never come true in real life. When we are distraught with the throbbing desires which are destined to end up in disillusionment, so the devil speaks.

Relationships are a socializing activity that requires human beings to be engaged in regular interactions which follow with the institutions of civilization. The connection between people refers to their dialogues which show the differences of their values. As far as Bakhtin is concerned, the discourse of each individual is loaded with their unique ideologies. Therefore, to examine the words of the characters in these short stories is to define their perspectives on life. However, since people always carry views that are more concerned with their own interests, the desire to defend one's interests will bring forth the collisions with others, which then incurs disagreements between the characters.

There are two sets of opponent ideologies in "The Great Felicity." Yuqing lavishes her money on her dowry to be a last review of her value as being a single woman pampered by men's courtship, which will soon be robbed by marriage. Her sisters-in-law, however, just take her shopping spree as an unforgivable extravagancy. While criticizing Yuqing for her squandering, the Lou sisters are elated at the malicious thought that Yuqing can do nothing to redeem the popularity of an unmarried woman, the advantage with which they will outshine her in her wedding. Lou Xiaobo is also in conflict with his wife as their evaluations of marriage vary from each other. Xiaobo thinks his wife is no match for him, but Mrs. Lou feels humiliated whenever her husband means to patronize her. In "Steamed Osmanthus Autumn Ah Xiao's Unhappy Autumn," the maid, Ding Ah Xiao, obsessive about the cleanliness of her surroundings as well as the purity of one's morals, is irritated by her employer, Grater, a Casanova who, once infected with venereal diseases, still feels free dallying with women for their financial gratuity. Moreover, Ah Xiao is also disappointed by her son, a somewhat timid boy who lacks ambition, who never learns to measure up to his mother's expectation for him to be a man of great achievement but only craves for a happy-go-lucky life full of food and fun. Even her husband rejects her as Ah Xiao realizes the quiet tailor is both indifferent to her dream of an enviable wedding ceremony and ignorant of her wish for him to be a responsible husband who can shoulder the burden of supporting a family.

The story of "Love in a Fallen City" portrays the confrontation between Bai Liusu and her family and that between her and Fan Liuyuan. As a divorcee tortured by her husband's violence, Liusu moves back to the Bai family for material and mental solace, only to find that her family members relentlessly label her as a jinx and accuse her of losing their money. Preoccupied with the idea of marrying Liuyuan as a way to both get her revenge on the Bai family and of winning a man to support her, Liusu is totally isolated from Liuyuan's yearning for genuine love and his inability to settle down in marriage. Though they are finally married, it is rather the result of a compromise than that of the compatibility of their values of life. In "Traces of Love," Dunfeng and her second husband, Mr. Mi, find themselves still touched by the memories of their previous consorts. Dunfeng is proud of the handsomeness of her first husband who died young, which apparently outperforms the senility of Mr. Mi. On the other hand, what lingers in the heart of Mr. Mi is the quarrels with his first wife which, vexing as they might be, bring him closer to the vibrant passions of his youth, while his courteous interactions with Dunfeng only reveals the distance between them.

The complicated patterns of relationships mark the major considerations of the Chinese religion. As Zhang argues, the fact that the Chinese faith is much about the maneuvering of relationships emphasizes the secularization of Chinese people. Uninterested in the world outside of their mundane life which focuses much on the associations with people, the Chinese thus evaluate a person in terms of his behavior, that is, his art of performing sociably. The Bakhtinian reading of four stories in *Chuanqi* displays the characters' views transpired either through the conversations or the narration of their consciousness. The interlaced branches of different ideologies form the area of heteroglossia where the voice of each individual encounters one another. These stories feature the clashes caused by the incommunicability of different values of the characters, while Zhang does not intend to provide the possible solutions that might hint at the potential agreements characters can reach. The irreconcilable conflicts, on the one hand, nourish the Chinese concerns about the everlasting imbroglio of relationships. On the other, they speak for the egoism of people, the devil of selfishness that determines their perceptions of life. As the characters are controlled by the desire of protecting their own interests, their social life in a civilized society only demonstrates the inevitable disharmony of their relationships.

The epilogue of *Chuanqi* envisions Zhang's obsession with China. Indulged in the decadence of China, she is also inspired to produce her acclaimed works. The contradictory mentality of Zhang to be emotionally attached to something that is affiliated with the sense of deterioration and disillusion is akin to the ambivalent attitude of humanity toward civilization. Neither the depravity of the Chinese culture urges Zhang to depart from her homeland nor does the incompatibility between civilization and human desires unfetter people from the frame of culture they are deeply ingrained in. In fact, it is the inability of disconnecting from the life one is rooted to that gives rise to the unbroken chain between civilization and its discontents.

The preceding pages have illustrated the discontents of civilization that torture the characters in Zhang's short stories as they endeavor to satiate their desires within the package of social demands is only greeted with failures. My study of *Chuanqi* is therefore brought to a unit in which the irreconcilable conflict between civilization and human desires is set as the criterion to trace and gauge the causes of the characters' sufferings. Moreover, it informs us that people suffer from the tragedies of life due to their failure to grasp the inscrutability of their desires which motivate them to be confronted with civilization.

In addition, the portrayal of the conflict testifies to the remarkable achievement Zhang has reached in this early selection. The critic, Liu Zaifu 劉再復, notes that:

> the works of Zhang Ailing are dense with the sense of desolation, and the immanence of the desolation is unique. The uniqueness comes from her pessimistic view of civilization and human nature. Pessimism derives from her realization that mankind is actually trapped in a tragic circle: to escape from the wilderness, human beings create civilization. However, civilization also motivates their desires and drives them to go back to the state of savageness. People strive for freedom, but never get it. They are not only the hostages of the world, but their own desires also hold them hostages [...]. Zhang casts her doubts about life and makes inquiries into the meaning of human existence, which thus grant her works incredible profundity. (33)

Liu's comments, on the one hand, incorporate the gist of this thesis as he also emphasizes the keynotes of "desolation," "civilization" and "desires". On the other, he assumes that Zhang's virtuosity in describing the inextricable dilemma human beings are embroiled in distinguishes her works from those of her contemporaries. Her talent flourishes in her works not because she makes political or moral judgments on her characters, but because she purges herself of the prejudices of her time. She goes beyond the boundaries of her time, tells stories that happen perennially, and places her works on a "philosophical and metaphysical" (Liu 32) level. The fact that Zhang's writings are enriched by her insights as a philosopher and a metaphysician is based on Liu's contention that Zhang succeeds in displaying "the eternal plight of human beings" (35). The plight refers to the desires that continue to tantalize and instigate people.

Furthermore, the profundity of Zhang's short stories is testified to by her portrayal of desires, "the unbeatable devil that dominates and determines the fates of human beings in an imperceptible way." It is "the tragedy over which the power of reason cannot preside and against which people cannot defend themselves" (Liu 36) that gives Zhang's works its philosophical dimension. As Liu argues:

> desire is the most active devil that arranges people's destinies, but it is also the most difficult concept to be articulated in an objective and logical language. However, it is the devil which can gain its vivid descriptions in literary works. Zhang's early works confirm her success because she is not bound to the ethic principles of her time, and gives a brilliant drawing of the devil. (34)

The reiteration of the themes of the previous chapters spells out the predicament that enmeshes the characters between civilization and human desires, and also sketches the totem of the devil lurking in Zhang's short stories, be it women's desires for men's love, people's desires for fantasizing about things beyond their reach, or the desires for self-interest. The philosophical dimension of *Chuanqi* is thus given its manifestation.

In an interview with Yin Yunpeng 殷允芃 at the latter stage of her life, Zhang claims that "the ending of life is always a tragedy. When you get old and every function of your body deteriorates, it is a tragedy. Even if you die young, it is still a tragedy" (Yin 166). To define tragedy in terms of Zhang's pessimistic belief requires careful explorations of her writings. In this thesis, the tragedy is attributed to the desires disillusioned by the stranglehold of civilization. Moreover, the fact that civilization is connected to the sense of desolation which haunts the stories in *Chuanqi* is also established by the unfulfilled desires of the characters trapped in a world where the primordial and the cultivated, the uncivilized and the civilized are intertwined and inextricable. The world is where civilization is shadowed by the desolation of the wasteland. The review by Chen Jianhua brings us to the preface of *Chuanqi* where women "who manage to get the upper hand" (*Written on Water* 201) actually signify people who struggle to survive in the destituteness of civilization:

> The woman who manages "to get the upper hand" is actually a signifier. It is the "desolate gesture" that has its frequent presence in Zhang's stories [...]. It seems that she has re-written the legend about "a woman whose beauty falls the cities and kingdoms." The heaven tumbles down and the earth cracks. The landscape of one's country has been ruined and deformed. But no one can shift the blame of the disasters onto her. She is also one of the insulted and victimized multitudes, unable to avoid the juggles of history, and even succumbing to the flows. But she does not identify herself with our civilization. According to her view, civilization, either sublime or frivolous, is nothing but "a waste land." She is willing to be exiled in this waste land, trying to survive with the primordial desires and the shrewd wittiness. When we consider the circumstances she is confronted with, she does "get the upper hand"—not only because she survives in civilization, but also because civilization is conferred its redemption because of her. (J. Chen 114-15)

Chen's comment is charged with the perspective that readers can encounter in the poem by T.S. Eliot, "The Waste Land." The poem begins with a passage from

Petronius' *Satyricon*, in which Sibyl, a prophetess who "was granted long life by Apollo" (Southam 84), implores for death. What inspires our serious reflection upon this allusion is the notion that Sibyl's wish to renounce her immortality is in defiance against the drabness and tediousness that perpetual life implies. The ennui Sibyl suffers, an illustration of the banal days of modern people, brings to light the stifling life human beings are anchored in. While people rely on civilization for "a stable culture" and for the "social roles" (Davidson 122) imposed upon them to guarantee their identities, it curbs and forecloses the eruption of refractory emotions that could lead to the disruption of the stability of society. However, the fact that civilization tightens its grip on "the unruly forces of improper desires in its emotional yearning" only results in the "order and propriety" (Davidson122-123) which deny the vital sparks of libido and which thus stand for the status of "stasis" (Davidson 123). The civilized man is inflicted with the same pain as Sibyl. Life "at a sterile, changeless state" (Davidson 123) signifies the horror no less intimidating than that of death. Civilization with the suppressed primal impulses and "sexual desires" loses the patronage of fertility, and thus is nothing other than a wasteland. Women, according to Chen, are granted the vision to perceive the barrenness looming behind the luster of civilization. Therefore, the "troubling premonition" (A. Zhang, *Written on Water* 199) that keeps gnawing at Zhang, as she claims in the preface, takes on a different dimension of interpretation. It is not only derived from the concerns of the impending annihilation of civilization, but it also connotes that civilization has contained in itself the sense of desolation which wafts across the wasteland.

Toward the end of her essay, "Wo Kan Su Qing" 我看蘇青 (My View on Su Qing), Zhang describes how she falls into a pit of helpless sorrow when standing on the balcony to take in the panorama of Shanghai:

> After she left, I stood alone on the balcony around dusk. Suddenly I took notice of a tall building in the distance, the edge of which was attached by a huge patch of rouge. At the beginning, I thought it was the light of sunset reflected by the windows. Then, after a second glance, I realized it was the moon at the night of the middle of January, rising with its red halo. I mused, "This is a chaotic age." Among the evening fog, the contour of Shanghai looked like a small wave. Though there is no mountain girdling around the city, still there seems to be range upon range of hills on the outskirts of Shanghai. I pondered on the fate of many people, including myself, and a melancholy and desolate emotion that conjured up a sentimental contemplation of one's destiny captured me. Usually, sentimental contemplation refers to the psychology of self-pity. But I think this term allows a more extensive interpretation. When the peace of the future finally arrives, we are no longer able to relish it. We are only able to acquire the peace within our reach and on our own. (*Zhang Ailing Quanji 14,* 95)

It is conspicuous that Zhang bemoans the unrest in her time. But a curious psychology is subtly alluded to at the end of this passage. Apprehensive about the turbulence of the current age, Zhang does not live in the hope for the promise of the future either. The war tolls her elegy for the decline of civilization. However, it is the espousal of civilization and the wasteland that gives rise to the sense of desolation ever-present in the age either of peace or of chaos. It is better to cherish the placid days accessible to her at the moment than brood over the fantasies about the future since Zhang has predicted that tomorrow will be as bleak and desolate as it is today. In the preface to *Chuanqi*, when Zhang pays her compliments to "the singers in *bengbeng* opera, who are always able to find a way to survive safe and sound, no matter in which era and no matter in what kind of society" (*Written on Water* 201), readers readily pick up the overtones of civilization as an allegory of desolation. "The empty unchanging desert represents what would happen if we want to" (Davidson 129) rid ourselves of the primordial desires. "Sadly," nevertheless, "the only alternative to the human world of" unruly cravings "is a barren waste" (Davidson 129), where civilization functions to quench the avidity for rampant lusts. Hence, "civilized people, tame and docile as they are, sometimes encounter a chilling sense of desolation, even when they abide by the rules" (A. Zhang, *Written on Water* 169). The "chilling sense of desolation" brings back to people's minds the desires that are not and will never be satisfied.

## Future Paths?

The concerns of this work can be encapsulated as a comparative study of desires in Zhang's short stores. Therefore, the line of inquiry of this thesis can be broadened into a number of research areas on desires and in comparative literature.

Desire is an issue whose universality is verified by the immense number of writings contributing to the investigation of it. I have proved that the theories of Irigaray, Lacan and Bakhtin work well in unveiling the desires that lurk in the hearts of these characters, and the further exploration of desires in Zhang's works is quite promising, as long as they provide an insightful and systematical analysis of the faces of desires different from the ones that have already been unmasked.

In this respect, works by Schopenhauer are a motivational start. The fact that Schopenhauer describes how human beings are conditioned by an irrational will which gives rise to an unquenchable and insatiable desire serves to be a possible approach to the trajectories of desires plotted in Zhang's works.

The comparative study of Zhang's stories has not been ignored by scholars in this field. The most popular comparison falls on the discussion of the relationship between Zhang Ailing and *Dream of the Red Chamber*, the classic given the most credit for inspiring her. Others have also made the effort to draw a parallel between Zhang and her contemporary writers, such as Lu Xun, Bing Xin 冰心, and Ding Ling 丁玲. David Der-wei Wang even produced a genealogy to list the Chinese writers whose works imply the attempt to reinvent the fictional world in Zhang's stories.

The intense passion to compare Zhang with other Chinese writers makes the scholarship which puts together Zhang and other western writers look relatively insufficient. In his book, *Zhang Ailing de Xiaoshuo Yishu,* Shui Jing contributed an essay that works on the comparison between "Aloe Ashes—The First Burning" and *The Portrait of a Lady* by Henry James. As far as I know, it is one of the most cited and consulted articles by those who are interested in the comparative study of Zhang.

I do not claim that there are no other articles that involve the relationship between Zhang Ailing and other English or European writers, but I do believe that more work could be done to provide researchers with more in-depth references.

The comparative study should not be limited to the theoretical readings of Zhang's works, but could also consider the similarities between the writings of Zhang and those of other western writers.

Katherine Mansfield is also known for her achievements in writing short stories. Her portrayals of female psychologies and of the conflicts between men and women invite a feminist comparison with those in Zhang's stories.

Zhang's attention to the frustrating and unfulfilled life of the mediocre reminds me of the works of Anton Chekhov, whose short stories also illustrate the petty tribulations and the sorrowful joys of the ordinary. Their focus on the trivial and disillusioning aspects of life deserves further examination.

This thesis, being a juxtaposition of Zhang's short stories and western literary theories, provides an interpretation of *Chuanqi* never demonstrated by other academic works. It announces the potential to expand the horizon of the research on Zhang Ailing by courtesy of the thorough interactions between the Chinese and western concepts, which may not only advance our understanding of Zhang, but also reward us with Zhang's perspectives on writers and/or theorists that she is bracketed with.

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