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**VERNACULAR MODERNISM:
ZHANG AILING AND HIGH AND LOW MODERN FICTION IN URBAN CHINA**

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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This dissertation aims to articulate the sociological and cultural meaning of the representative fictional writings of Zhang Ailing (1920-1995) in contexts and approach that befit the nature of Zhang's work. To do that requires nothing short of a revision of the existing paradigms in the study of modernity and of the conventional approaches to literary history.

In the introduction, I argue that Zhang's fictional texts must be read against an expanded understanding of the (Chinese) modern experience in the urban context to include what I call "ordinary modernity." And I argue that Zhang's fictional language – with rich generic and stylistic layers that cut across the great divide between the high and the low modern literature – registers the cultural logic of the ordinary urban community, its "style of abundance" corresponding to the latter's provincial cosmopolitanism and eclectic cultural anarchy.

It is necessary and productive to read such a body of fiction with the method of Marxist-Structuralist genre criticism under the premise of Raymond Williams' belief that "culture is ordinary." In the body of the dissertation, I conduct such generic criticism on three of Zhang's most representative novellas: *Aloeswood Incense: the First Brazier*

(1943), *Love in a Fallen City* (1943), and *Red Rose, White Rose* (1944), which feature respectively three central themes that informed high and low modern fiction in urban China: (urban) *reality*, *individualism* (and love), and (modern) *sexuality*. By juxtaposing the high and low literary culture's responses to these themes in a relationship of mutual completion and mutual testing, Zhang's fiction made possible an in-depth dialogue and exchange between the two traditions. With expanded and deepened understandings of modern experience and culture, Zhang then developed her own, essentially *modernist*, responses to the central themes of modernity.

In the conclusion I argue that in her novelistic thought and practice (which I call "vernacular modernism") Zhang created a new literary paradigm in which the key relationships that defined China's modern literary culture – those between art, culture and the people – were reconceived.

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Introduction

Having been a focus of political disputes and literary adulation, Zhang Ailing (English name Eileen Chang, 1920-1995) is by now firmly established as one of the most important novelists in modern Chinese language.¹ Recently, literary scholars from Chinese (Taiwan, Hong Kong, mainland China) and Western academia have been contemplating whether Zhang Ailing has become another “myth” in the history of modern Chinese literature – second after Lu Xun (1881-1936), the founding father of modern Chinese fiction and a towering figure in modern Chinese literary and cultural thought.² Indeed, the field of modern Chinese literature and culture is not faced with the question whether Zhang Ailing deserves serious study, but whether Zhang Ailing study can match, in scope and rigor, the status that she has already attained.

This thesis aims to articulate the sociological and cultural meaning of Zhang Ailing’s fictional oeuvre – specifically the influential novellas and short stories produced

¹Zhang Ailing (traditional Chinese 張愛玲, simplified Chinese 张爱玲) was born in 1920 in Shanghai to a privileged family. Having received education in Shanghai’s missionary schools, she enrolled in the University of Hong Kong in 1939 after her plan to study at the University of London was disrupted by the outbreak of war in Europe. Due to the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong at the end of 1941, Zhang had to abandon her study once more and returned to Shanghai to make a living through writing. Between 1943 and 1944 Zhang Ailing published a prodigious body of novellas, short stories and essays in occupied Shanghai’s leading literary journals and enjoyed meteoric success and fame. Her literary career saw the first serious blow after the end of war, when her then husband fled China due to his collaborative activities during Japanese occupation. Zhang left China in 1952. After that she wrote anti-communist novels in English and successful film scripts in Chinese (Hong Kong period), and translated into English classic Chinese novels (U.S. period). Married to Ferdinand Reyher and then widowed, she died in Los Angeles in 1995. The canonization of her work began in the 1960s with C. T. Hsia’s *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction* (1961). Zhang Ailing “fever” started in Taiwan in the 1960s, reached mainland China in the 1990s and became a pan-Chinese phenomenon in the 2000s.

²The “International Conference on Zhang Ailing and Modern Literature in Chinese” held in 2000 at Lingnan University (Hong Kong), for example, opened with a forum discussing that question. Such discussions on one hand suggest that Zhang Ailing is more than just a novelist but has great importance, comparable to Lu Xun’s, as literary and cultural thinker; on the other hand, the word “myth” implies that the said importance still remains to be articulated.

in the *Chuanqi* period (1943-1945)³ – in contexts and approach befitting the nature of her work. I argue that Zhang’s fictional texts must be read against an expanded understanding of the Chinese modern experience in the urban context, one that should include what I call “ordinary modernity.” And I argue that Zhang’s representative works – modernist in effect and message – used a vernacular fictional language that should be read against the ordinary history of modern Chinese literature, one that cut across the great divide between high and low modern fiction.⁴

To articulate the connection between Zhang’s textual practice and the above-named contexts in formally rigorous manner, I have chosen the method of genre criticism as it is practiced by Western Marxist critics such as Raymond Williams and Frederic Jameson. These critics look at genre (or what Williams calls “form” and “convention”) as a mediating zone between social, determinative structures on one hand and individual creative practices on the other, allocating the history of forms a relatively autonomous status as the one they assign to culture.⁵ In their works, genre criticism is the critical practice where the critic starts with the analysis of individual texts against the history of forms and genres, and through the mediation of the history of forms the critic then articulates the social and cultural meaning or significance of a given literary text.

³Zhang’s fictional production could be divided into three parts: the first part, collected in one volume titled *Chuanqi* (传奇, first edition in 1944, second edition in 1947) includes novellas and short stories whose style can indeed be characterized by the word “*chuanqi*.” The second part is made of the novellas, short stories, film scripts and novels published after the end of war in 1945 and display a style very different from the previous period. The third part of Zhang’s fictional production includes novels in English and film scripts in Chinese, published in Hong Kong after Zhang left China in 1952. I use the phrase “*Chuanqi* stage” to both convey a sense of periodization and a sense of style.

⁴That is, between the Western influenced, elite literature and the more home-grown, urban popular literature. I use the word “more homegrown” to suggest that even this “low” form of modern fiction has incorporated the influences of popular fiction from the West and might not be completely “Chinese.”

⁵By recognizing that culture is a semi-autonomous field that does not just reflect historical reality but also registers critical and creative *responses* to reality, Western Marxism or what Williams calls cultural materialism has corrected the mechanic, deterministic model of base and superstructure adopted by orthodox

In literary criticism, the decision over which interpretative method to use is always the result of the interlocking of two factors: the interpreter's purpose and desire, and the nature of the very text(s) under study. The decision to choose the above-described interpretative contexts and method is based on my growing knowledge of the nature of Zhang's fictional works and my desire to overcome the shortcomings of the existing critical approaches.

After the ideologically charged criticism of Zhang Ailing in the 1940s and the appraisal of the literary qualities of Zhang's works in the 1960s and onward, the 1990s saw the formation of the consensus that Zhang's work is *culturally* significant. During this period some major breakthroughs were made in the articulation of the sociological and cultural meaning of Zhang's works; but the findings, contradictory and even mutually defeating – the two dominant themes of Zhang Ailing study in the 1990s were urban folk and urban decadence⁶ – make one suspect that the whole of Zhang Ailing's literary enterprise still escapes our knowledge.

Meng Yue's essay "Chinese Literary Modernity and Zhang Ailing" (*zhongguo wenxue xiandai xing yu Zhang Ailing*, 1992) was in my view the first major breakthrough in terms of glimpsing the whole. Meng put forth the thesis that Zhang's originality lies in

Marxist critics. See Raymond Williams' *Culture and Materialism* (Verso 1980), especially Section 2, for the clearest theoretical articulation for this aspect of Williams' thought.

⁶The urban folk (*chengshi minjian*) thesis originated in the work of the Chinese scholar Chen Sihe, who placed Zhang Ailing, sociologically and culturally, at the opposite pole of the national (*miaotang*) and the bourgeois (*guangchang*) modernity and sees Zhang's work as expressing "the cultural spirit of the urban folk (*dush meijian*)."⁶ But Chen's thesis was soon to be contradicted and drowned out by a plethora of studies that placed Zhang in the context of urban decadence or *haipai* writing, a school of writing that is rooted in the experience of the ultramodern. These readings are mutually defeating: how could one writer stand once on the side of the urban folk and the grass root and once on the side of the ultramodern and the decadent? The mutual defeat of their findings exposes the partiality of these angles and suggests that they might be addressing individual (some diametrically opposed) dimensions of Zhang's fictional creation rather than seeing the whole picture.

that she has turned the Chinese modern experience – “the not so new, not so old” (*bu xin bu jiu*) life and language experience – into a new literary imagination. Meng understands Zhang’s *chuanqi* as a form that registers the coexistence, contrast and mutual defining of the traditional and the ultra-modern, a form that allows Zhang to shift between these two experiential and narrative spaces.⁷

So far I find Meng Yue’s interpretation the most productive in that it calls for the reading of Zhang against a renewed and expanded understanding of the Chinese modern experience. But it also shows significant limits. By being narrowly focused on the *literary* imagination of Zhang texts, Meng has in the end abandoned her own attempt to direct Zhang Ailing study to the cultural question.⁸ And by interpreting Zhang’s fiction as finding a literary form for the co-existence of the two kinds of modern *experiences*, Meng Yue has greatly simplified Zhang’s literary enterprise: Zhang’s work has not only registered different modes of modern experiences, but also different responses to experiences, formalized in recognizable literary and cultural models which I call *genre*.

In my own study I start from where Meng Yue has stopped. Following up on the above-named limits of Meng Yue’s study, I will discuss my approach to Zhang Ailing in connection to the two key issues mentioned above. First, I will open up Zhang’s works to the question of *modernity*, with due sociological and cultural content that comes with the term. Second, I will inquire into the nature of Zhang’s fictional creation, and its modernity, in connection with the question of *genre*.

⁷Meng’s article is collected in Wang Xiaoming ed. *Piping kongjian de kaichuang: ershi shiji zhongguo wenxue yanjiu*. Shanghai: Dongfang chubun zhongxin, 1998. 334-355.

⁸The narrowness of Meng’s approach is testified by her narrow definition of modernity which mainly involves the modern conception of time, for this definition is the most philosophical and can be easily translated into a question of literary imagination. As a result, her study, having started with something to do with culture, ends up returning to the kind of literary analysis that has been practiced for several decades by

I. A writing of one's own – ordinary modernity and vernacular modernism

Let me use Zhang's much-discussed essay "A writing of one's own" (*ziji de wenzhang*, 1944) to start on the first keyword in question, modernity. "A writing of one's own," intended as a polemical article,⁹ is probably the most systematic and manifesto-like of Zhang's essays. In this essay, Zhang has laid out her mission(s) as a novelist, and I interpret that mission as two-fold: to give expression to the experience of countless ordinary people in her era; and to use her writing to correct some problematic tendencies that dominated the literary writings of her age. In other words, Zhang was saying to the effect that as a novelist she had something to offer in terms of the representation of the *modern experience* and in regard to *modern literary culture*.

Regarding modern experience, Zhang claims in the essay that she wants her fiction to represent the experience of the ordinary, not so heroic (*bu shi yingxiong*), modern men and women who however make up "the totality" of her era (*shidai de zongliang*).¹⁰ In that context Zhang has referred to her fictional character, Liusu, and her romance in Hong Kong with an ethnic Chinese man educated in Britain. Zhang has also referred to another female character, Ni Xi, and her "lively and practical" (*huopo zhaoshi de*) relationship with men (Nixi has lived and born children with various men, including an Indian man, a

Zhang scholars before her – analysis of Zhang's use of imagery and of the construction of space in Zhang's fiction etc.

⁹ It was written in response to Fu Lei's criticisms of her work ("On Zhang Ailing's Fiction" 1943), which showed strong resentments toward Zhang's treatment of certain characters, accusing them of being too petty and decadent while the author did not show due condemnation.

¹⁰Zhang Ailing, Vol. IV, 174, my translation.

Chinese man, and a British man).¹¹ Both characters give the impression that the experiences of the ordinary modern people could be quite vital and adventurous.

Next to that, the essay also points out that these same men and women are haunted by a profound feeling of rootlessness: “People live in an era, but this era sinks like a shadow, and people living in it feel abandoned. In order to prove one’s existence and hold on to something real and basic, they have to turn to the ancient memory – the memory of human living across the ages.”¹²

Zhang’s understanding of the modern experience is thus quite balanced. Her view is very similar to Marshall Berman’s, formulated some forty years later:

[t]o be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world -- and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are. Modern environments and experiences cut across all boundaries of geography and ethnicity, of class and nationality, of religion and ideology: in this sense, modernity can be said to unite all mankind. But it is a paradoxical unity, a unity of disunity: it pours all into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish. To be modern is to be part of a universe in which, as Marx said, “all that is solid melts into air” (15).

For both Zhang and Berman, modernity brings mixed blessings. It promises mobility, adventure, crossing of boundaries, but at the price of suffering disintegration, uncertainties

¹¹Zhang Ailing, Vol. IV, 176, my translation.

¹²Zhang Ailing, Vol. IV, 174, my translation.

and groundlessness. Zhang's fiction has fully exploited the fictional possibilities that such modern experiences might bring.

While Zhang Ailing's insight on the modern experience is on a par with many writers and theorists on the same subject, her take on modernity also shows some very distinct personal touches. Compared to Berman, who in his work devotes equal space to the discussion of *modernity* as a body of experiences and *modernization* as the social processes that bring the modern experience into being, Zhang's emphasis is decidedly (and curiously) on modernity as experience, *not* on the process of modernization.

Let me quickly clarify the terms used here, especially those that relate to the various aspects of the modern. Put simply, the word "modernization" is commonly used, as Berman did, to refer to the material processes and social projects that brought about great changes during the modern period. The definition of "modernity" is more varied among theorists and scholars: sometimes "modernity" is made to refer to the body of *experiences* lived by people in the modern period (Berman 1982), and sometimes it refers to a whole existential, social and cultural *condition* that distinguishes the modern period from the periods before or after (Harvey 1990).

The word "modernism" is usually used in reference to the *cultural* or *aesthetic* response to modernity. The part that has brought confusions is that, as a word that describes cultural response to modernity, "modernism" sometimes stands for the cultural ethos that makes "a conscious commitment to modernity" (Calinescu 86), sometimes it stands for the the cultural ethos that is "distinct" and "bitterly conflicting" to historical modernity (Calinescu 41). To ease the confusions, in my thesis I call the former "modern culture," and the latter "modernist culture." I use the word "modernism" mainly to refer to

aesthetic responses to modernity; and I use it in basic sense of the term that the modernist artists were preoccupied with the question of *representation* (Lewis 2007), which set them apart from the realist ethos of the nineteenth century preoccupied with the *object* of representation.

In her essays, Zhang used the word “modern” (*xiandai*) in most of the above named, associated meanings – as a kind of new experience, as a new social condition, and as a cultural ethos. But rarely did she discuss modernization as material processes and social projects. In this particular essay where Zhang declares her mission as a novelist, she has her eyes fixed again on the *experience* of people in the modern age. In short, the discussion of modernity, as a body of experiences, far outweighs Zhang’s discussion of modernization, if there was any at all.

This conceptual imbalance is due to the fact that Zhang’s view of the modern experience comes from a particular angle and is based on the experience of a particular social group. Different from the intelligentsia that actively advocates the project of modernization, or capitalists and industrialists that actively exploit the economic opportunities of modernization, the ordinary, not so heroic, urban people that Zhang is interested in depicting are those that are not conscious about modernization as such but *simply live its consequences and live them on the most immediate personal level*. Away from the neon lights and the social agitations in their city, these urban commoners, even when holding very modern values and having typical modern relationships, may not think of themselves as modern at all, for their world does not seem to be modish (*modeng*)

enough to be called so.¹³ Zhang's contention in the essay is that without the inclusion of this body of modern experience – I call it “ordinary modernity” – one cannot capture the “totality of the era.”

The phrase “ordinary modernity” is inspired by recent works that argue the co-existence of multiple modernities in the modern period,¹⁴ especially those that make the same point in regard to urban studies. Jennifer Robinson, for example, uses the concept of “ordinary cities” to describe a certain kind or dimension of urbanism that is neglected and downplayed by urban studies that still operate within the paradigm of modern culture, with its “valorization and celebration of innovation and novelty” (4). Indeed, Zhang's attention is on the “ordinary” dimensions in the urban experience – those that are not so radically new and dynamic, not so self-consciously modern, but nevertheless constitute a very real and important texture of modern city life. And her emphasis is also polemically intended: her manifesto-like essay starts with a critique of the ethos comprised of “superman,” “revolution” and “energy” – all expressions of the Promethean spirit that characterizes modern culture,¹⁵ a modern culture that exactly for the sake of these values belittles and resents the “ordinary modernity” that Zhang is interested in.¹⁶

¹³While the word “modern” (*xiandai*) was loaded with weighty historical and cultural meanings, its counterpart “modish” (*modeng*), meaning fashionable, trendy and vanguard, was more frivolous and was used specifically in the urban context to refer to people who were in style and values ultramodern.

¹⁴Peter James Tylor's *Modernities: A Geohistorical Interpretation* (1999), for example, argues that different modern times and different modern spaces exist in a world of multiple modernities, by which he means first of all the co-existence of different models of capitalism: merchant capitalism, British model industrial capitalism and American model consumer capitalism (-- all three are relevant to Shanghai). Also see James Clifford's *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (1997) that argues the multitude of the modern experience from the point of view of cultural anthropology. In the context of modern Chinese literature, there were also discussions on multiples modernities such as repressed modernity (Wang 1996), everyday modernity (Dong and Goldstein 2006).

¹⁵Cultural modernity in modern China is mainly in the spirit of “a conscious commitment to modernity” (Calinescu 86) with the Promethean pursuit of change, development and progress, and the destruction of the old. What Calinescu calls cultural modernity in the West, that is “distinct” and “bitterly conflicting” to historical modernity (Calinescu 41) had only a marginal presence in China. The antithetical cultural modernity that Calinescu refers to mainly manifested in the romantic and decadent writings. But as Leo Lee

Meant as a conceptual counterpart to the modernity that is characterized by novelty and vanguard spirit, “ordinary modernity” does not, however, simply mean being backward or traditional.¹⁷ Let me use the example of Ni Xi, the character discussed at length in Zhang’s essay. Seeming to walk right out of the Ming and Qing Novel of the Townspeople (*shijing xiaoshuo*), Ni Xi actually lives a life that would not be possible in any traditional or pre-modern society: she has lived and raised children with a series of men without a wedding vow – Indian man, Chinese man and British man; young, old and middle-aged. Not only is this kind of experience “modern” (probably in a decadent twist that modern feminists would not like), it is even “cosmopolitan.” It is however not the cosmopolitanism that we know, one that is associated with the Enlightenment universalism of the intelligentsia or the cultural liberalism of the metropolitan crowd; it rather belongs to what James Clifford calls “discrepant cosmopolitanisms” – marginal, provincial cosmopolitan experiences outside the dominant paradigms.¹⁸

Although the exact nature of this body of modern experiences – that is, the sociological, existential, and cognitive implications of these experiences – remain to be found out through historical research and through the analysis of writings by writers like

pointed out, even the Chinese decadence was not that critical of bourgeois values as was the Western counterpart (83).

¹⁶It is quite symbolic that the institutionalization of the “modern” Chinese fiction was marked by the taking-over of the urban popular literature journal *Fiction Monthly* (*xiaoshuo yuebao*) by Literary Association (*wenxue yanjiu hui*), which, as a means to articulate its own (modern) philosophy of literature, launched a series of attacks on urban popular literature and coined the derogatory term “petty urbanite” (*xiao shimin*) to refer to the backward masses living in China’s cities. Mao Dun, the ring-leader of that effort, opened his own novel on Shanghai *Midnight* with the lines that ended with “LIGHT, HEAT, POWER” (Mao, 1).

¹⁷A problematic tendency in Zhang Ailing studies is that, once realizing that Zhang has focused on the not so new and not so dynamic aspect of urban life, many commentators were quick to point out that Zhang’s work is about the encounter or contrast between tradition and modernity.

¹⁸See James Clifford’s highly influential *The Predicament of Culture* (1988) and *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (1997).

Zhang Ailing (which is exactly one task of this thesis),¹⁹ the oxymoronic terms used here – such as “provincial cosmopolitanism” and “ordinary modernity” – are coined to convey the point that such experiences are not simply backward or traditional, they are *modern* experiences, but they contain antithetical elements to the prime, high modernities that we know. In this thesis I will be using terms such as “low modern,” “ordinary modern,” “discrepant cosmopolitanism” instead of “traditional” “backward” etc. -- all to testify to this dialectic.

Beside the ambitious claim that her fiction seeks to represent the “totality” of her era, Zhang has also, in the same essay, made a curious assertion that a particular, new fictional *form* is needed to properly register the modern era as she understands it. One of the terms that Zhang has used to refer to the form of her fiction is “uneven contrast” (*cancha de duizhao*). Claiming that this form is a betterment from direct contrast, Zhang sees her fiction as moving away from the classic model of sharp dichotomies and absolute opposites.

This notion of “uneven contrast” seems to be quite a match to the above discussed dialectic entailed in “ordinary modernity.” But it remains to be seen whether “uneven contrast” is indeed a formal principle that governs Zhang’s fictional creations as a whole; if yes, how exactly does it work from novella to novella. For the moment the following things could be initially said about Zhang the literary thinker.

¹⁹To truly investigate on the “everyday modernity in China” (which the book edited by Dong and Goldstein has attempted to accomplish), is to put together a large collection of fictional works, especially works produced in the urban popular literature tradition and in the so-called “New Urbanite Literature” wave in the 1940s and conduct an anthropologically informed analysis. In my project I have brought in, in relation to the generic references in Zhang’s fiction, a varied body of writings that help yield some insight in this regard.

First, like many modernist writers, Zhang is not only concerned with the object of fictional representation, she is also concerned with *representation* itself. As scholars of modernism have pointed out, trying to find new methods of representation appropriate to the modern experience is the common denominator of the otherwise very different and diverse modernisms.²⁰ The cultural attitudes that the writers hold toward historical modernity might differ (in Zhang's case it also remains to be found out what is her assessment and view of the modern experience being portrayed), but they are driven by the same impulse: to develop an aesthetics that reflects the modernity of the modern experience.²¹

Also like the modernist writers, Zhang's desire to make the form of her fiction conform to its content drives her to break with literary establishments and existing models of representation. In the essay Zhang has spoken against the "superman" cultural ethos, the classic model of sharp moral contrast, the dominance of "theme" in modern Chinese literature etc – all in the effort to make the ethos and forms of her writing live up to the modern experience that she seeks to represent.

While seeking to renovate the fictional form, Zhang has not, however, chosen the path of formal experimentalism that many modernist writers took. Instead, she seemed to have decided to write her modernist novel with a familiar fictional language: her fiction felt quite "comfortable" (Zhang's own words in "A writing of one's own") to various types of urban readers and was an instant critical and popular success. The result is a puzzling

²⁰Pericles Lewis, for example, chooses to adopt this singular formulation to flesh out the "underlying unity" to the various modernisms between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (xviii). See Peter Nichols, *Modernisms: A Literary Guide* (1995), for a similar approach, which sees the common denominator of the various modernisms as the impulse "to create the authentically new" to counter the inner sameness entailed in capitalism and its philistine culture (7).

contradiction: on one hand her fiction appeared to be quite conventional if not trite – one commentator wrote in 1944 that “it is easy to find traces of other well-known novels” in Zhang’s fiction (Chen Zishan 67); on the other hand, the deep meaning and structure of her novelistic oeuvre continues to elude commentators today.

In other words, if Zhang was practicing a modernism at all, she used a “vernacular” fictional language to deliver it. Or, perhaps the vernacular fictional language is the very element of her unique brand of modernism, whose exact nature remains to be revealed.

II. Modernism and the common culture – genre writing across the great divide

By “vernacular fictional language” I mean first of all *genre* – established genres, whether they be popular ones or serious ones, around which and through which Zhang constructed her new fiction. Just as the bookshops in her time did not know which shelf exactly should Zhang belong to (Chen Zishan 53-54), the *eclectic generic and stylistic layers* in Zhang’s works make today’s commentators puzzle over how to position her culturally and literarily. Commentators have linked Zhang’s works at the *Chuanqi* stage to New Literature (to Lu Xun’s *Diary of a Mad Man* by Fu Lei, to post-May Fourth women writers by Yu Qing and others), to urban popular literature such as the Social Novel (Jin Hongda and others), to *haipai* writing (Yan Jianyan and others), to Chinese masterpieces of domestic realism (C.T. Hsia and others), and to Western modernist fiction (Shui Jing,

²¹See the works of Renato Poggioli (1968), Peter Bürger (1984) and Matei Calinescu (1987) for the discussion of the aesthetics in the context of Western avant-garde and modernism, see Ban Wang, *The Sublime Figure of History* (1997) for a discussion of the same issue in the context of modern China.

Wang Jialiang and others).²² The plots and characters of Zhang's fiction, with dense generic references woven around them, make the meaning of Zhang's novellas greatly enriched but also elusive and hard to pin down.

In other words, by adopting or subverting the genres, combining them or actually letting them turn against each other, making them mean or actually allowing them defeat “meaning,” *Zhang's fiction highlights the matter of genre*. Despite the fact that genre is a universal dimension to any literary practice, one has to say that genre is playing an especially intensified role in Zhang's fictional language. Is it out of commercial calculations to sell books? That seems to contradict Zhang's own aspiration to be visionary and innovative. Or does it have something to do with the “ordinary modernity” that Zhang seeks to represent?

To begin with, for a writer like Zhang Ailing, being smitten by the common culture (a more neutral-sounding term I use to substitute for overloaded terms like “popular culture” or “mass culture”) and a common cultural phenomenon like genre is not necessarily contradictory to being visionary and modernist. After all, one part of her visionary project is the discovery of *ordinary* modernity.

In terms of cultural philosophy, Zhang appeared to have believed and practiced what Raymond Williams declared years later: “Culture is ordinary.”²³ For Zhang Ailing, culture with a capital “C” and culture with a small “c” are equal. In her world, mosquito

²²These commentaries are easily found in any good collection of Zhang Ailing studies. The ones that I have consulted include: *Research Materials on Zhang Ailing* (*Zhang Ailing yanjiu ziliao*, ed. Yu Qing and Jin Hongda, 1994), *Sixty Years of Zhang Ailing Commentary* (*Zhang Ailing pingshuo liushi nian* ed. Zitong and Yiqing, 2001) and *Zhang Ailing Style: Zhang Ailing Commentaries before 1949* (*Zhang Ailing de fengqi*, ed. Chen Zishan, 2004).

press and New Literature, Chinese opera and leftist film, popular urban ballad and experimental poetry, Zhang Henshui and D. H. Lawrence, were all good food for her thought and art. In Zhang's discussion of them, she accorded each phenomenon its distinct place in terms of meaning and historical context,²⁴ but in terms of value – human, cultural or aesthetic value – they were equal.

Putting Zhang's attitude into theory, Raymond Williams advocated an expanded understanding of culture: he used the word "culture" to mean both "the arts and learning – the special processes of discovery and creative effort" and "a whole way of life – the common meanings." Acknowledging that some writers reserved the word for one or the other of these definitions, Williams insisted on *both*, and on "the significance of their conjunction" (Higgins 11). Almost echoing Zhang Ailing, who considered delusional anyone who thought he or she could "stoop" to the masses ("On writing" *lun xiezu*, 1944), Williams tersely announced in the 1950s, "There are no masses, there are only ways to see people as masses" (Higgins 18).

For people like Zhang Ailing and Raymond Williams culture is indeed "ordinary." Many attribute Williams' radical cultural philosophy to his working class background. The similar argument could also be made for Zhang Ailing in regard to her radically mixed upbringing. But to say that Raymond Williams comes from Britain's working class culture and that culture has shaped him is not the same as saying that Williams' is simply the philosophy of the working class people. The same is true for Zhang Ailing. Zhang's "ordinary" cultural philosophy is as much a result of Zhang's upbringing as it is a

²³The idea was formulated in an essay titled "Culture is Ordinary" and was first published in 1958 in a collection of essays of the British New Left (*Conviction*, edited by Normal Mckenzie, London: MacGibbon and Kee). The essay was then included in *Culture and Materialism* (London: Verso, 1980).

conscious choice by Zhang Ailing the writer and cultural thinker²⁵ and is to be understood in the context of the cultural politics of her time.

Equally indebted to the Western influenced, elite culture and to the more homegrown, ordinary urban culture, Zhang's decision to speak against the former on behalf of the latter is a polemic decision – it is for the purpose of defying the hegemony and dominance of the elite culture – the culture that suppressed the “ordinary modernity” that Zhang was interested in depicting.

It is evident that Zhang is not only interested in the *experience* of the ordinary urban people, she is also interested in their *culture*, their reading culture and the cultural language they speak. Earlier I have said these ordinary urban people are not interested in or conscious of modernization as such but simply live its consequences. Now are they interested in *culture* as such? What is their behavior in cultural production or consumption?

Among all the things that Zhang has written about in that regard, some I think are quite telling of the overall cultural character of the urban commoners. First of all, Zhang has repeatedly mentioned that the urban commoners, or what she calls *shanghaien*,²⁶ are practical, worldly wise and amoral in their worldview (the first essay that Zhang published

²⁴This marks Zhang's difference from the postmodern eclecticism where things are deployed out of historical context, and her difference from some of her contemporary writers who practiced an eclecticism much more flattened and devoid of depth.

²⁵Actually Zhang's upbringing gives her an equal chance to stand on either side of the great divide between high and low culture – she benefited as much from the Western, elite education associated with her mother's world, as from the more homegrown and popular education associated with her father's world, with serialized novel, mosquito press and *The Count of Monte Cristo* (the element of popular culture from the West) – but she chose to lean toward the latter when she came to form her own cultural thinking and novelistic philosophy.

²⁶Although sociologically “Shanghaiense” include all kinds of people living in the city of Shanghai – ultramodern and parochial, foreign and Chinese – culturally speaking the word “Shanghaiense” (*shanghaien*) carries a middle-brown connotation, often used in reference to qualities that distinguish Shanghai's residents from residents of other cities in China: qualities such as pragmatism, cultural eclecticism, and a worldly aversion against all things grand and noble.

after the onset of her literary career, “Shanghaiense, after all,” expressed exactly this insight). If culture with the capital “C” is meant to be a modern substitute for religion, tradition and ethics in a secularized world, the ordinary moderns, being irreverent toward or ignorant of “Culture” as such, lived in fact in a real *cultural anarchy* if not tempered by their healthy and worldly common sense and some habits of tradition in everyday life.²⁷

This implies that one cannot in effect use the perspective of literary *culture* when discussing the reading behavior of these people, literary *anthropology* (using Wolfgang Iser’s concept) is probably a more apt perspective. As Iser points out, “[t]he more fiction eludes an ontological definition, the more unmistakably it presents itself in terms of its *use*” (267, emphasis mine). Indeed, the urban common reader is necessarily a self-centered reader: irreverent toward or ignorant of the intended messages or the original contexts of literary texts, he or she reads according to each one’s own needs and desires.²⁸

Taking into view this so-called self-centeredness and the anarchy that govern the cultural behavior of the urban commoners, one can easily see the importance and centrality of genre, or *genres*, in this community’s print culture.

First, such a community would logically give rise to a multitude if not an anarchy of genres. Ronald Schleifer, editor of the journal *Genre*, argues in *Modernism and Time: the Logic of Abundance in Literature, Science and Culture* that the significance of Bakhtin’s genre theory lies in that, considering genre central to ordinary discourse and verbal art,

²⁷Discussing the Social Novel genre in the early Republican period, Zhang observed that this genre that was highly popular among the urban common readers showed none of the didactic flavor of late Qing social exposé or the Enlightenment pathos of the May Fourth literature; rather it “stopped at worldly wisdom,” in which “even satire was fading out.” Zhang observed that Social Novel prospered in an environment where people “felt disillusioned about all things new;” these people, “although feeling nostalgia toward the old morality,” felt that “the old world was equally remote” (Zhang Ailing, Vol. IV, 294, my translation).

²⁸Let me use the example of the reality-bound Social Novel again. If its function is not to castigate (*qianze*) or criticize (*piping*) reality as was the case for late Qing Castigatory Ficiton (*qianze xiaoshuo*) and May Fourth

Bakhtin's conception of genre, in connection to his concept of carnival, is actually "a response to the abundances of knowledge, materiality, and experience in the new century" (208). Indeed, if different emotional tastes, different social needs and cognitive experiences are the roots of different genres, the sheer diversity of these in an anarchic cultural environment would logically mean the proliferation of genres.

In late Qing China the sudden proliferation of genres was one of the signals of the onset of an incipient modernity (Wang 1997): according to David Derwei Wang, during that period there were about 170 presses catering to a potential audience of two to four million, which featured a stunningly anarchic mixture of genres "from detective fiction to science fantasy, from erotic escapades to didactic utopias, from chivalric cycles to revolutionary romances" (Wang 2).

The same generic anarchy continued, with varied intensity and configuration, throughout the Republican period. One confession from Zhang Ailing can serve as an indicator of Shanghai's generic landscape in the late 1930s: Zhang once confessed that at the beginning of her effort at writing, she believed that she could write "anything": "historical novel, proletarian literature [*puluo wenxue*], New Perceptionist literature, and the more common genres such as the family ethics novel, the Social Novel, the martial arts novel, sentimental fiction or erotic fiction, the sky was the limit" ("What to write" 1944, 8).²⁹

Social Problem Novel (*wenti xiaoshuo*), then it was largely serving an *anthropological* function: to answer the urban residents' need to imaginatively "master" the overwhelming and fast-changing urban environment.
²⁹ Proletarian literature is literature on the urban poor or the urban industrial worker. Often infused with the spirit of social romanticism and/or revolutionary vanguard, it was popular in the early 1930s. New Perceptionist literature is an offshoot of *haipai* urban decadence. Focusing on the sensuous stimulations of the metropolis and the alienation felt by the ultra-modern metropolitan crowd, it was popular throughout the 1930s. These genres belong to the so-called New School (*xin pai*), a loose category to include all Western influenced literature written in the modern Chinese. Historical novel, the family ethics novel, Social Novel and the martial arts novel belong to the so-called Old School (*jiupai*), a loose category to encompass the more

Zhang's strikingly eclectic reading list, meant to reflect the mental landscape of a young, adequately educated urban reader, leads to another insight regarding the pattern of cultural consumption in Shanghai's ordinary urban culture. If from the objective point of view, the cultural atmosphere of ordinary modernity is grassroots anarchy, in terms of the subjective reading experience, the ordinary urban reader practices in fact a petty cosmopolitanism.

Indeed, *exactly because the urban common reader is amoral, non-ideological, apolitical, self-centered and pragmatic, his or her reading scope could be wider than that of any truly "cultured" person.* The above-quoted reading list of Zhang crosses camps, schools and ideologies -- some "genres" are from the post-May Fourth New Literature tradition, some from the *haipai* tradition, some from the tradition of urban popular literature, meaning that all three important strands of modern Chinese literature and culture are included in the reading experience of *one* ordinary, adequately educated urban reader. Its extreme (if somewhat shallow) cosmopolitanism can be easily fathomed if one thinks of, say, a very cultured and well-read person like Mao Dun: would someone like Mao Dun read and *enjoy* literatures so widely apart?

The explanation for this phenomenon, offered by the French critic Paul van Tieghem is that once one defines literary types in terms of their relationship to the emotional needs of author and reader rather than their formal structures or cultural contexts (this is what Wolfgang Iser means by the user-oriented view of literature), it is very easy to understand why genres that seem far apart from each other in other ways should in fact be

homegrown genres written in the traditional Chinese vernacular (*baihua*). Sentimental fiction and erotic fiction were phenomena common to both schools; here Zhang was referring to genres in the Old School.

seen as allied by their consumers.³⁰ Consuming across cultural and literary hierarchies or even across historical time (anachronism) should be only logical.

At this juncture I want to add that, although genre-centeredness does reveal a mass reading culture, the *actual* genres involved do not have to be just the popular ones. Here it is especially notable that Zhang's list also includes New Literature, meaning elite literature, genres. For some, it is hard to connect elite literature to the word "genre." But the fact is, by the 1940s, not only had the content of New Literature become part of the popular consciousness, even the form had become the urban fad. Editors of literary journals of wartime Shanghai were lamenting the spread of "New Literature cliché" (*xinwenyi landiao*), in that the techniques and stylistic features of post-May Fourth realism were imitated in a flattened manner by legions of amateur writers.³¹

Indeed, the discussion of Shanghai reading culture needs to go beyond the two fixations, urban popular literature and *haipai* writing, that so far have dominated Shanghai study. It needs to recognize that the literary and cultural Shanghai is where the cultural products of China, high and low, North and South, freely circulated and were selectively and creatively consumed according to the urban common readers' needs and desires. In view of this, I prefer using the term "urban China" to "Shanghai" when I discuss Shanghai's cultural make-up. This also applies to Shanghai's ordinary reading culture.

To a certain extent, one can say that the urban commoner's reading experience, taking place in a modern city with its "abundance in knowledge, materiality and

³⁰Paul van Tieghem, "The question of literary genres," originally published in the journal *Helicon* in the late 1930s, quoted in Dubrow (86).

³¹Zhang herself wrote and even published such works. See "Cow" (*Niu* 1936) and "Farewell My Concubine" (*bawang biejie*, 1937), collected in Zhang Ailing, Vol. I.

experience,” is characterized by a user-centered, provincial and anarchic cosmopolitanism.³² This is a very good match to the provincial cosmopolitanism that I have discussed earlier in regard to the urban commoners’ modern *experience*. It appears that the ordinary modernity and its *culture* are governed by the same logic.

It is in this context, in relation to the ordinary experience of modernity and the ordinary reading culture, that the dense generic layers in Zhang’s fictional creations and the relevance of genre in Zhang’s literary and cultural thought are to be understood. The generic density and eclecticism, or what I would call the *style of abundance* (borrowing from Schleifer’s terminology), in Zhang’s fictional language is the first mark of her unique brand of modernism: she is the first writer who has translated the provincial cosmopolitanism, the cultural logic of ordinary modernity, into a literary *form and style*. In short, Zhang was indeed following her own modernist aspiration: to make the *form* of her fiction correspond to the object of her fictional representation.

III. Genre and interpretation: from history to text to cultural ideology

Identifying genre as an entry point to Zhang’s fictional world is only the beginning of the interpretation process. In my interpretation of Zhang’s individual fictional texts, I follow an interpretative procedure whose steps could be characterized with the following three keywords: (genre as) *history*, *text* (as system), and (form as) *cultural ideology*.

In the three chapters that follow, I have analyzed three of Zhang’s most representative fictional works: *Aloeswood Incense: the First Brazier* (1943), *Love in a*

³² “Provincial” because it is self-centered, ignorant of or indifferent toward the larger contexts or the intended meanings of the various cultural products.

Fallen City (1943), and *Red Rose, White Rose* (1944). I start with the recognition that the three texts are about three dominant themes in modern literature and culture: (urban) *reality*, *individualism* (and love), and (*modern*) *sexuality*.

Having recognized the subject matter, I then ask “what are the main generic forces within the text which engage with that subject matter?” Since what I mean by genre is not rhetorically defined universal modes such as tragedy or comedy, but historically and socially embedded genres that were once active in concrete historical and cultural settings, this step requires the interpreter to be as familiar with the history of genres as the novella’s intended reader. And the interpreter, having identified the important generic elements in a text on its central subject matter, should be aware of the historical “content” of each of the genres.

To historicize a genre is to recognize that each genre comes with a historically embedded baggage, having crystallized cultural attitudes, values, ideologies, or a set of fears and desires in a concrete historical and cultural setting, which Raymond Williams would sum up as the “structure of feeling.” The contribution that Raymond Williams’ cultural materialism has brought to the study of genre is that he basically looks at a genre (or what he calls “convention”) as *form with a content*. The said “content” is what he calls “structure of feeling” – the cultural character of a given social formation expressed in routinized responses to certain subjects.³³

³³Raymond Williams’ explains the difference between his concept “structure of feeling” and the common notions such as “ideas” and “general life” in the following terms: “structure of feeling” is more anthropologically oriented than “ideas,” but more concrete and accurate than “general life.” It is meant to capture how the prevalent ideas of a community at a given historical moment are *experienced* (thus the word “feeling” is better than “idea”); and the ideas are experienced as essentially related, their relatedness congealed in some kind of structure (thus the term “structure of feeling”). This is exactly how genre works – each genre is not about one single idea or about separated ideas, it rather congeals a set of *related* fears and desires, aspirations and values into one coherent, recognizable form (Williams “Film and the Dramatic Tradition,” collected in Higgins 25-42).

Only by taking account of the historical baggage (the structure of feeling) behind the generic elements can a text's sociological and cultural texture begin to surface. The sociological, existential, and cognitive meanings of the experiences depicted in Zhang's fiction, *with dense generic references woven around them*, can thus be fleshed out. So in my chapters a significant part of the interpretation process is devoted to the "unpacking" of the fictional elements in Zhang's texts along the generic references.

With that step fulfilled, I then, following the practice of the Formalists and the Structuralists, look at *the text* itself as a system in its own right. This is to find out how the different generic elements work and interact within the text's system, without which the generic elements are ultimately meaningless: just as words come with meanings attached to them, but are only truly "meaningful" within the context of a sentence; genres come with meanings attached to them, but what they actually "mean" in a given text has to be read against the text's own "grammar."

In *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (1981), Frederic Jameson demonstrates with his own analysis of selected novelistic texts that only in this kind of text-based, structuralist (I call it "grammatical") reading can genre criticism truly help reveal the meaning of a text.³⁴ Indeed, in my own analysis of *Red Rose, White Rose*, for example, I find that the ultimate meaning of the text only starts to emerge when one recognizes that the successive women that the protagonist, Zhenbao, has been involved with (each of them conjures up a familiar genre in regard to the matter of gender) are

³⁴In addition to the work of generic elements under the text's own "grammar," Jameson also pays attention to the so-called "generic discontinuities" in a text (*The Political Unconscious* 185). This is when certain generic elements do not enter the text in their original shape: they may be mutated, or may be recombined, the most extreme case being that original antithetical genres are married together. This is the case with the two central characters in *Love in a Fallen City*, where otherwise totally antithetical genres and principles are combined into the personality of Liusu and Liuyuan, thus forcing the reader to question the validity of the commonly held dichotomy.

arranged in the text in a pattern of cyclic repetition. It is this *pattern*, not the individual genres organized under this pattern that constitutes the truly individual and creative element of that novella.

The “grammar” by which the author organizes the existing genres and makes them “mean” is where the true creative element of a literary text lies. Seeing narrative as a “socially symbolic act,” Jameson insists on reading the said “grammar” politically: for Jameson the said “grammar” contains the author’s conscious generic intervention, namely the author’s response to the cultural politics of the time which is materialized in a landscape of genres; or it indicates the author’s unconscious submission to the pressure that the changing structure of feeling of his or her time exerts on the novelistic form – in either case a change in generic *form* is a major ideological or cultural event.

The final step of my interpretative procedure is then to analyze the said “grammar” and the change in generic form *ideologically*, to return the discovery at the text system level back to the social and cultural field. Basically it means to ask “what is the structure of feeling that *this* particular text, with its new formal element, conveys?” For example, the said cyclic pattern in *Red Rose, White Rose*, once read ideologically, leads me to the recognition that the episodic nature of the plot – Zhenbao in his sexual experience not only repeats many that went before him, in the text he even repeats himself from episode to episode without ever truly understanding why – are formal features that are in perfect harmony with the existence of (Zhenbao) the “ideal modern (Chinese) man”: the cyclic pattern of repetition shows that his existence is over-determined by the dual principles of Puritanism and hedonism that are built into modern capitalism system and the workings of modern city. Zhang might not be the first writer to have recognized the essential

unoriginality of the modern existence, but she is certainly the first modern Chinese writer who has found a *form* for that vision.

It is by the last step – ideological reading of the “grammar” by which Zhang Ailing rewrites the generic elements that she gleaned across the divide between high and low modern fiction – that I have come to recognize the deep cultural logic of Zhang’s fictional oeuvre. I argue that it is in the final analysis modernist.

Chapter One

The Touch of the Real: Sensation, Realism and Zhang Ailing's Modernist *Chuanqi*

Zhang Ailing's debut novella *Aloeswood Incense: the First Brazier* (*Chenxiang xie: diyi lu xiang* 1943, subsequently *First Brazier*)³⁵ features a theme central to hundreds of fictional works in the modern period: it is about a young person who, having left home and familiar settings, tries to find his or her way in the big city.

The urban environment, as it was registered and experienced by the (young) migrant, was the theme frequently visited by modern fiction. As Peter Brooks put it in his study of European realism in the nineteenth century, during the modern period the city became “a total environment that writers concerned with the context and reality of modern life must come to terms with” (14). In the Chinese context, this could certainly be said about the city of Shanghai.

In China, much of the modern experience, as recorded in literature, was about fighting against the feudal society and its various forms of repressions while individuals sought, and sometimes found, their new life in a new environment. This environment could be the big cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, it could also be the towns swept up by nationalist revolutions and the waves of new social and cultural thoughts. Very often, the

³⁵Many Chinese families, especially the traditionally-minded ones, like to burn incense, either as a homage to the ancestor shrine, or as a meditative mood-setter. At the opening of the novella the narrator asks the reader to “go and fetch, will you please, a copper incense brazier, a family heirloom gorgeously encrusted now with moldy green, and light in it some pungent chips of aloeswood. Listen while I tell a Hong Kong tale, from before the war” (Kingbury 7). Obviously the author imagined the reader as a Shanghai new urbanite, whose life smacks of tradition and comfort, who does not however routinely practice ancestor worship – meaning no longer so traditional in belief and practice. Aloeswood is a kind of wood that the Chinese like to use for incense.

representation of the new environment focused on the “new,” such as the revolution of customs and the come-and-go of new ideas, not necessarily the “urban” aspects.

But novels about Shanghai, be it in the old or new style, were overwhelmingly centered on the *urban* aspect of the city: the dense and motley population, the impersonal but energizing streets and street crowd, the absence of restraints in the seeking of sensuous and carnal pleasure, the crude rule of money and class etc. In other words, during the modern period Shanghai was probably the only city in China that truly constituted a great shock to the perceivers (meaning truly different from the semi-modern towns that the Chinese knew), where there was indeed “the *reality* of modern life” (Brooks 14, my emphasis), not just *ideas* of the modern. A city as such, almost representing modernity itself, becomes something that deserves to be written about in its own right.

Zhang’s *First Brazier* continues with this quintessential modern theme and appeals to the modern reader’s sustained interest in cities as such. Her subject is Hong Kong – another alien, colonized port city like Shanghai, which, since the breakout of the Sino-Japanese war, had become another destination of migration for the Chinese.³⁶ Zhang at the very beginning of the novella promises the reader “a tale of prewar Hong Kong” (meaning a tale of Hong Kong before it *also* fell to the Japanese in 1941), selling “Hong Kong” and the experience of Hong Kong by a migrant (by Weilong, “a very ordinary Shanghai girl”) as the reading interests.

Identifying these two elements – the city and the migrant – helps little, however, in determining what kind of urban literature *The First Brazier* is. Featuring the same themes, and often writing on the same city, Shanghai, the modern period of China saw at least three

³⁶According to Cai Rongfang, between 1937 and 1941, Hong Kong received eight hundred thousand migrants from different parts of China, doubling the city’s population (213).

different kinds of urban literature: there was city literature in the tradition of urban popular literature, in genres such as the Social Novel (*shehui xiaoshuo*) and detective fiction; and there was city literature in the tradition of New Literature (*xin wenxue*), usually called by the name of naturalism or realism (*ziran zhuyi* or *xianshi zhuyi*); and there was city literature in the *haipai* tradition, such as works of the New Perceptionist (*xin gangjue pai*).³⁷ The variety, one may say, was due to the rapid change that Shanghai went through from decade to decade – each decade giving rise to different kinds of city literature. That argument, although accounting for some of the factors, does not really solve the problem: for even if one looks at the representation of Shanghai during the same decade, say, the 1930s, the contrast between the above mentioned schools is just as glaring.³⁸

To begin to make sense of the great variety of literatures produced on the same city, or even the same urban reality, one has to realize that what is called “reality” does not just involve what is objectively out there. Rather than naked matter detached from human perception, “reality” also involves the experiencing and knowing *subject*: meaning that the reality represented in fiction is often selective, determined by what is desired and what needs to be known. The episteme -- the epistemological mode by which one comes to know reality -- might be different as well. In other words, intelligent discussions on “reality” in literature should begin with the question “who is experiencing what aspect of reality in what particular manner and episteme?”

³⁷See Wen Rumin, *Transformation of Realism in the New Literature Tradition* (*Xin wenxue xianshi zhuyi de liubian*, 1988) for the most thorough account of the history of various realisms in the New Literature tradition. See Shih Shumei, *The Lure of the Modern*, for the most thorough treatment of the *haipai* literature and its relationship to the semi-colonial urban setting.

³⁸The representative writers from the three schools in the 1930s, Cheng Xiaoqing (author of bestselling detective fictions set in Shanghai), Mao Dun (author of naturalist novel on Shanghai) and Mu Shiyong (author of New Perceptionist fiction on Shanghai), produced writings on Shanghai that had little in common in terms of style or sentiment.

Having examined *The First Brazier* along this manner of questioning, I find that Zhang's debut novella, in its representation of urban reality, made an unprecedented synthesis of three kinds of subjectivity and episteme: 1) the petty urbanite subject, who is driven by the desires and anxieties characteristic of someone *situated and embedded* in the urban context, whose episteme shows some amount of commonsensical knowing but an even greater amount of mystery, awe and not knowing; 2) the realist subject, a *detached, elitist* subject, who views urban reality through an enlightened episteme, which shows the Enlightenment confidence of knowing, and confidence in mastering the outer and inner reality – a confidence encouraged by the development of the social and human sciences since the nineteenth century; 3) the modernist subject, who continues the Enlightenment pursuit of the real and the truth, who is however suspicious of the all-knowingness of the realist subject and more ready to face the mysterious and the unknown as elements of the real.

What effect does such a combination produce? Is the novella representing the one and same reality seen through three different lenses? Or, each different subject and episteme actually opens up different aspect(s) of the real? What more is involved beside the synthesis of the three? What kind of “realism” was Zhang practicing in the end? The discussion that follows aims to answer these questions.

I

The real as *chuanqi*: urban environment and the petty urbanite episteme

In very general terms, one can say that *The First Brazier* is about getting the *shanghairen* readers to know “Hong Kong,” using Weilong, “an extremely ordinary Shanghai schoolgirl,” as the surrogate to deliver the *shanghairen* readers an intimate encounter with the city. A closer look would however call for a modification of that statement, for the novella is not about Hong Kong per se, but some particular aspects of Hong Kong that speak to the desires and anxieties of the petty urbanite *shanghairen* readers.

The rich and exclusive “wealthy residential district in the Hong Kong hills,” and specifically the morally and socially promiscuous circle of Weilong’s aunt, Mrs. Liang, is the “Hong Kong” presented in Zhang’s novella. It is a very particular aspect of the city, an aspect that appeals to the desire and anxiety of the petty urbanite reader: the wealth and glamour are objects of desire and envy for the ordinary urban readers, while the moral decay and social promiscuity speak to their anxiety and concern. Weilong, the “very ordinary Shanghai schoolgirl” shares similar mental make-up as the novella’s intended, *shanghairen* reader. So the novella offers the perfect *vicarious experience* through which the *shanghairen* reader gets to know and experience the city of Hong Kong in the aspects they care about and in the manner and episteme similar to those with which they approach the city in real life.

The episteme of the these petty urbanite readers is best captured by the term *chuanqi* (传奇), which happens to be the title that Zhang gave to the first and most important collection of her short stories and novellas in 1944 (the revised edition in 1946 featured the title *Xin chuanqi* (新传奇)).

I.1 The real as *chuanqi*: urban milieu and the sensation of the city

The word *chuanqi*, literally meaning “the record of the strange and the extraordinary,” is a classic mode of fictional writing and an established genre since the Tang dynasty.³⁹ As a pre-Enlightenment genre, the term implies subjectivity rather than objectivity of reality: “strange” (*guai*) or “extraordinary” (*qi*) are relative adjectives that describe not reality per se, but certain subjects’ reaction to and perception of reality – strange and extraordinary things are things strange to somebody, or extraordinary according to someone’s view. Zhang’s use of this term for her own novellas reveals her connection to this traditional episteme and narrative, or, to its modern variation – Shanghai’s urban popular literature that gave the narrative tradition of *chuanqi* a modern twist.

Urban popular literature’s take on reality is essentially sensational. The Social Novel is supposed to be the most realistic genre within the tradition of urban popular literature, which, according to Zhang Henshui, “had to be about reality” (Zhang Henshui 25). But anyone with adequate knowledge of the genre knows that it is actually about sensational aspects of reality – Social Novels usually feature aspects of urban environment that stir urbanites’ desire and curiosity, and especially those that cause shock and disturbance. These aspects are extraordinary rather than ordinary dimensions of reality. A literature that focuses on these aspects is realistic – it is after all about actual reality – and sensational at the same time. I call it sensational realism, or *chuanqi* realism.

These two terms, “realistic” and “sensational,” do not have to be antithetical. In fact they were not considered antithetical until the emergence of modern realisms of all sorts, like naturalism and critical or social realism. These genres, with all their differences, uphold the ideal of (scientific) objectivity and prefer ordinary aspects of reality to extraordinary ones.⁴⁰ With modern realism rising in critical prestige, the social, epistemological and artistic values of the sensational and *chuanqi* realism were increasingly neglected. Zhang’s *chuanqi* is thus of great critical significance: Zhang was foregrounding the term *chuanqi* after the prestige of modern realism was long established. This act forces one to reexamine *chuanqi* and sensational realism, a mode of realism central to the social and cultural life of China’s urban centers in the first decades of the twentieth century.⁴¹

³⁹ See Xue Hongze, *A History of Chuanqi Novel (chuanqi xiaoshuo shi)*, and Rania Huntington, *Alien Kind: Fox and Late Imperial Chinese Narrative*, for more detailed account on the history of the *chuanqi* genre in China.

⁴⁰As soon as the criteria of modern realism – objectivity and ordinary reality – were formulated, urban popular literature came under attack for missing these qualities. It is not a coincidence that Zhou Zuoren and Shen Yanbin, two prominent theoreticians of modern realism were also the most famous critics of the Social Novel and Scandal Novel.

⁴¹After the first major wave of urban popular literature, namely the love stories of the early 1910s, the 1920s witnessed the next major wave, which included three types of novels – the so-called “social novel,” the Western-style detective fiction, and the notorious “scandal fiction.” Except the scandal fiction, the other two genres remained vital well into the 1940s.

The “scandal fiction” (*heimu xiaoshuo*, literally “the novel of black curtain”) is the most short-lived one among the popular genres mentioned. It started in 1915 when Shanghai’s Newspaper of Current Events (Shishi xinbao) put out an open notice titled “collecting scandals of China”, and it ended in 1918 with the publishing of the *Pictorial Anthology of China’s Scandals* (Huitu zhongguo heimu daguan).

“Social novel” (*shehui xiaoshuo*) is in comparison a much more inclusive term. In its broad sense, the term refers to novels ranging from the late Qing “fiction about prostitution” (*xiaoxie xiaoshuo*) and “castigatory novel” (*qianze xiaoshuo*) (before Lu Xun’s label was widely adopted, these novels were known under the category of “social novels”), to the “social novel” (*shehui xiaoshuo*) in the 1920s, and it includes also the social-sentimental (*shehui yanqing*) novels. As the most important genre of popular urban literature, “social novel” as such didn’t finally wane away until the late 40s and early 50s.

In its narrow sense, the name “social novel” stands for the so-called “Republican social novel” (*minguo shehui xiaoshuo*), it refers to a type of reality-bound novel that has outgrown the late Qing format and enjoyed heyday in the later 1910s and early 1920s — concurrent with the above mentioned “scandal fiction” wave. Zhang grew up reading the Republican Social Novel and remained enthusiastic fan of the genre.

In a sense sensational realism is urban dweller's literature for it captured ordinary people's perceptions of urban reality and promised to serve the needs of ordinary urban residents – be they noble or base needs.

The rise of the sensational Social Novel and Scandal Fiction (*heimu xiaoshuo*) was simultaneous to Shanghai's runaway growth from a treaty port to the largest city in China – between 1911 and 1927 Shanghai's population more than doubled to reach 2.6 million, and this large population was densely concentrated in the foreign concessions. Responding to the readers' need to cope with the unprecedented urban environment, the first theme of the Social Novel is simply the city itself. An overwhelming number of Social Novels in the 1920s had the city of Shanghai as their subject matter and used the city's name in the title⁴².

Zhou Shoujuan, thrilled publisher of Zhang's debut novella *the First Brazier* and seasoned editor of popular literary journals, once wrote a preface for *Tides of Shanghai Harbor* (*xie pu chao*, 1921), the representative text of the Social Novel genre in the Republican era.⁴³ This preface, like many of its kind during the early Republican period, typically understood the new genre as reflection and response to the new settlers' profound sense of shock and the feeling of being overwhelmed:

Shanghai, an ocean of people. People from all regions reside here in a hotchpotch, good species mix with the bad, *strange and outrageous things* unfold every day and are countless. Looking around, *scandals* abound and overwhelm; people try to find out, to no avail, what actually happened and how. . . . My friend Dream-teller of Shanghai [haishang shuomeng ren is author Zhu Shouju's alias] is a long time Shanghai resident and has spent years searching for and collecting *the strange and the odd* . . . Here he presents the so-called *strange and outrageous* happenings to the world. The black curtain, although thick, is instantly lifted up (emphasis mine).⁴⁴

⁴²The most notable ones are Zhu Shouju's *Tides of Shanghai Harbor* (*xie pu chao*, 1921), Bao Tianxiao's *Spring and Autumn of Shanghai* (*shanghai chunqiu*, 1924, Bi Yihong's *Dark Shanghai* (*heian shanghai*, 1925).

⁴³*Tides of Shanghai Harbor* is another work that Zhang claimed as her familiar reading ("On reading" 1976).

⁴⁴Included in the book edition of *Tides of Shanghai Harbor* published in 1921 by Xinmin Tushuguan. This passage reveals the link between "scandal fiction" wave (late 1910s) and the Republican "social novel" boom

For the urbanite readers in the 1920s, the city was a source of shock both morally and existentially. The reality-bound Social Novel, as Zhou Shoujuan speaks for them in this preface, promised to serve the needs and interests of the new settler readers – their interest in the unknown parts of the city, their need to reach a certain degree of knowledge and familiarity with the environment they found themselves subjected to. These almost noble intentions were, however, mixed with the not-so-noble calculations to stay on the readers’ level and to appeal to their psychology. The overwhelming emphasis on the “strange and outrageous” things in the above quote indicates that the writers of the Social Novel would only deliver the “reality” that the ordinary urbanites wanted to know – aspects that are shocking and disturbing, aspects that *the urbanite readers could not master in reality but would practice to “master” through the imaginary acts of vicarious, fictional experience.*

The “prewar Hong Kong” that Zhang promised to depict was of immense interest to Shanghai urban readers in the 1940s – it was another area of reality that the Shanghai readers needed to “master.” Just as Shanghai was a puzzle and source of anxiety to the new urban settlers in the 1920s, during the 1930s and 1940s, with many well-to-do *shanghairen* fleeing to Hong Kong due to the Sino-Japanese war, “Hong Kong” became a new source of attraction, curiosity and apprehension for *shanghairen*. Some historians call Hong Kong of the prewar period (between the outbreak of Sino-Japanese war in 1937 and the outbreak of the Pacific War at the end of 1941) “Casablanca in the East,” for it became the new capital

(early 1920s) – they were so closely related that some works from the latter genre were, as here in Zhou Shoujuan’s preface, often read and promoted as “heimu xiaoshuo.” The social and psychological complex

for the Europeans fleeing Shanghai and other parts of China, and the new battlefield for the intelligences from China, Japan, the West and the Southeast Asian countries, where the original great contrast between the rich and poor and the city's atmosphere of opulent decadence and cold indifference were further fanned by the influx of capital and savings as well as refugees during the war (Cai, 173-227).

Although Hong Kong of the prewar period was full of fictional interests, not every writer could write about Hong Kong intelligently for Shanghai readers, unless he or she was able to, as Zhang put it, “look at Hong Kong from the point of view of *shanghairen*” (“After all a Shanghainese” 1944). The aspects of Hong Kong that Zhang chose to present – not the salons of the European diplomats, or the clubs frequented by the spies, but a mansion in the “wealthy residential district in Hong Kong's hills” – catered to the psychology of ordinary urban readers. The ordinary urban readers were not interested in national affair, they were interested in urban issues not too much beyond their experiential horizon – such as Weilong's possibility of becoming rich, or fallen, through a rich, female relative in Hong Kong.

Further confirming that *The First Brazier* targets the urbanite readers is the intensely *private* nature of the depicted urban milieu. At the opening the reader is promised a story of Hong Kong the city. But right after the beginning of the novella the reader is led into a private mansion and is to stay there for the most part of the story. To today's readers the intense privatization of the fictional space is striking and suffocating.

The approach that a typical Social Novel took to the city was in that of *private secrets*, not public scandal. This is one of the key differences between the Republican

that called forth the “heimu” literature was also operating here in the expectation and reception of the Republican “social novel.”

Social Novel and, say, the late Qing Castigatory Novel (*qianze xiaoshuo*). The representative text of the Social Novel genre, with a very ambitious title *Tides of Shanghai Harbor*, actually starts with the very private story of a young widow Shaoshi who, like many during her time, has newly arrived in the city and lives with some fellow settlers in an alley house. Through her relatives' help Shaoshi finds work in the household of a remote relative, who is rich, married and has long settled in the city. Shaoshi the newly arrived provincial woman is then scandalously seduced by this Shanghai merchant, becomes his concubine and is then abandoned. Around Shaoshi's rise and fall of fortune, the novel weaves a few dozen such private scandals – most of them taking place in the setting of alley houses and within particular private households.

Why would a genre that touts the “city” as the subject matter and selling point take such micro and private approach? The following factors, among others, might be relevant. First, the growth of the city's population and the increasing concentration of it forced people to live in close proximity to total strangers. This increased the need for privacy and led to the privatization of urban life. Also the life among strangers loosed the surveillance that was available in traditional clan society and maximized the chance for transgression and perversion. These two developments, added together, means that an infinite variety of lifestyles – many immoral and improper according to traditional or ordinary standard – were held behind closed doors. This created an interior city, whose landscape was just as colorful and unsettling as the one on the street.

While public events and public figures were made known by modern journalism and the major newspapers, fiction and the penny press served to supplement what the official press could not cover – the secrets and scandals that took place among not so public

figures, in the not so public settings. In short, acting as a supplement to the newspapers, the Scandal Novel and Social Novel attempted to penetrate and lay open the *interior of the city*.

Following that tradition, Zhang's "Hong Kong *chuanqi*" features *Hong Kong as it is seen from the inside by an outsider*, delivered exactly according to the cognitive and psychological needs of the Shanghai urbanite readers. The technique of domestic realism that Zhang adopts, with minute depictions of the petty squabbles among masters and servants and the patient outlining of the settings, furniture, and garments, reminds one of the masterpieces of domestic realism such as *Dream of the Red Chamber* or *Jin Ping Mei*, but in Zhang's novella it serves to account for something that is just the opposite of domesticity – it is about a city that inspires fear, anxiety and awe. In other words, *the sensationalization of the private space* is one of the most important markers of the Republican Social Novel.

As a part of the sensational urban milieu, popular urban literature often features a kind of individual whose life and fortune are dramatically and problematically tied with the city – with the city's wealth, glamour and opportunity, as well as with the city's vice, dangers and evil. These individuals, call them legendary or notorious, are living embodiments of the city's dubious character.

Mrs. Liang, Weilong's aunt, is such an individual. When she is young, Madame Liang can be a character right out of the pages of Shanghai's mosquito press – the daughter of a gentry family in decline, she chooses to wed, in the prime of her youth, a wealthy old man, "just to wait for him to die" so that she can have all his fortune to herself, with which she later builds a luxury mansion high on a hill of Hong Kong. But since now she has become a part of the city of Hong Kong, her social circle shows a distinctive Hong Kong

flavor: the parties she hosts feature, among others, rich merchants, playboys, social butterflies of hybrid ethnicity, young college men and Catholic nuns. What she does with this promiscuous crowd is nothing short of a scandal: amassing wealth through the older men, culling sensuous and sexual satisfactions from the younger men, and befriending the young, socialite women so that she could use them as bait to attract frivolous young men.

This woman, while living a private, somewhat secretive life in her sequestered mansion, is deeply implicated in the city's moral and social character. Her habit and her social circle capture the "Hong Kong" that Zhang wants to convey: at once sensational, scandalous and exotic. It is no wonder that, when Zhou Shoujuan first read *The First Brazier*, he immediately thought of Somerset Maugham (who is actually one of Zhang's favorite authors). According to Graham Greene, for most readers the name Maugham conjures up 'adultery in China, murder in Malaya, suicide in the South Seas . . .'⁴⁵ This description – mixing sensationalism with exoticism – well captures the essence of Zhang Ailing's "Hong Kong *chuanqi*."

Zhang's novella offers the perfect vicarious experience of this at once sensational and exotic world. While Zhang's novella has on one hand uncovered the secrecy of this world by way of Weilong's intrusion, on the other hand, through Weilong's "triumph" in Mrs. Liang's social circle, the novella allows the Shanghai urban readers a chance to "master" this world imaginatively.

Weilong's "mastering" of the new, alien environment passes through several stages. At the first stage, Weilong exercises an *alert watchfulness*, very similar to the attitude cultivated by detective fiction, which is especially reserved for the criminal and

seedy aspects of a modern city. A “schoolgirl” who is educated in both Shanghai and Hong Kong’s modern school system, Weilong’s approach to the new environment would be more observant and sensitive than those of the uneducated heroines featured in the Social Novels. More importantly, she has been alerted by her family in advance about the scandalous history of her aunt. As a result, Weilong first approaches her aunt’s household with a gingerly excitement. This attitude shows the same *dubiousness* as the attitude cultivated in detective fiction – the detective is detached and distant from the seedy and criminal city, he is at the same time also thrilled by the excitement of adventure and discovery that the city provides.

Having passed the initial stage of alert and thrilled watchfulness, another side of Weilong starts to show at the next stage. Weilong is after all young and immature; there is a certain *aimlessness* in her being that will make her interaction with the environment similar to that of the flâneur – open to the full sensuality and absurd allure of the environment exactly due to the lack of immediate practical engagement with it. Originally Weilong has the intention of borrowing money from her rich relative, but she is not desperate – upon her first encounter with her notorious aunt and the first glance at her manner, Weilong is already thinking whether she should reconsider and change her plan altogether. Her staying is on one hand due to the scheming of her aunt (Mrs. Liang sees Weilong’s potential of becoming an “attraction” in her household and for that purpose “generously” offers to help out with her tuition while letting her live in the mansion for free), on the other hand it is due to Weilong’s own playful aimlessness.

Compared with the gullible female protagonists in the Social Novels, Zhang’s protagonist is much more middlebrow and better educated. As a result, the goal and needs

⁴⁵Greene, “Some Notes on Somerset Maugham” in *Collected Essays* (New York: Viking Press, 1969), p.196.

of Zhang's protagonist are less straightforward – it is much less about materialist or monetary temptations, but more about the *sentimental or sensuous allures* of the city.

Indeed, with the very quick and dramatic development of Shanghai and the formation of the New Urbanite class, the focus of urban adventure has changed. The following paragraph is often quoted, explaining how Weilong is finally hooked into the new environment, being fully aware of its indecency:

. . . Weilong couldn't get to sleep; as soon as she shut her eyes she was trying on clothes, one outfit after another. Woolen things, thick and furry as a perturbing jazz dancer; crushed-velvet things, deep and sad as an aria from a Western opera; rich, fine silks, smooth and slippery like 'The Blue Danube,' coolly enveloping the whole body. . . (Kingsbury 29).

What is striking here is the sensuous thingness of the world in Weilong's perception. Weilong's interaction with her environment is more or less in the mode cultivated by *haipai* and New Perceptionist writings. It is a dubious attitude in that the protagonist of the New Perceptionist writing is *both* revolted *and* enthralled by the city – revolted in one's soul and moral feeling, while enthralled in one's five senses.

Indeed, Weilong's "mastering" of this environment starts with her sensuous exploitation of the things in it while shunning the people. By building a sensuous relationship with the pretty things in this world, she starts to taste her first triumph in it. At the surface, the social life of the modern city is about spectacle and visuality; Weilong, by looking good and sensuous, finds that her aunt's social world starts to respond to her favorably. She starts to *look* a part of that world, regardless whether she *is* a part or not.

She will soon be. Weilong's experience of truly becoming a part of that world proves to be much more disturbing.

II. The real as *chuanqi*: the gothic and the surreal city

The cognitive and emotive modes mentioned above – be it that of the detective or that of the flâneur – presuppose an interested subject, but this subject still holds reasonable degree of observational distance, composure and control vis-à-vis the environment. These modes constitute, however, only half of Weilong’s experience in the urban environment. Another half of the novella rather depicts the new urban reality as so overwhelming, sinister and grotesque that the protagonist’s cognitive and moral rationality can no longer cope with it. In these moments the environment starts to feel *gothic*.

As a narrative mode or as existential sentiment, the gothic played an active role in both Western and Chinese literature. In the Western context, the adjective “gothic” means “belonging to or redolent of the Dark Ages; portentously gloomy or horrifying.”⁴⁶ Gothic novel is, in the narrow sense, “a story of terror and suspense” set in a “medievalized setting” such as a “gloomy old castle or monastery.” In the broad sense, gothic novel includes novels that do not have a medievalized setting but share “a comparably sinister, grotesque, or claustrophobic atmosphere.” Gothic elements are in the works of many modern novelists such as Poe and Faulkner and are often to be seen in the modern variety of romance dealing with endangered heroines.⁴⁷

In the Chinese context, *zhiguai* (record of anomalies) tales since the Six Dynasties and ghost tales such as those written by Pu Songling are representatives of the Chinese

⁴⁶“Gothic adjective” *The Oxford Dictionary of English* (revised edition). Ed. Catherine Soanes and Angus Stevenson. Oxford University Press, 2005.

⁴⁷“Gothic novel” *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*. Chris Baldick. Oxford University Press, 2008.

gothic⁴⁸ – they are stories that promise disturbing encounters with the supernatural or the freakishly abnormal. In the works of the modern period, some *haipai* writers such as Shi Zhecun in the 1930s and Wu Mingshi in the 1940s famously adopted the gothic narrative to convey modern existential and aesthetic sentiments.

If realism – I use this word in the broad sense, which includes the sensational realism discussed above – is about knowing and mastering one’s environment and represents the enlightened modern age, gothic writing is about not knowing, mystery, and being overwhelmed or threatened by the environment, which represents the pre-enlightenment Dark Ages. Although the gothic experience of mystery, gloom and menace is suppressed and marginalized in the modern age of rationality and science, it is still the real experience of many ordinary people vis-à-vis their environment. Zhang’s novella is then attempting nothing short of a revolution. She appears to be writing a novel that is about both knowing and not knowing one’s environment, thus restoring truth (true “realism”) to the novel’s representation of experience.

The gothic genre that Zhang explicitly alludes to in her novella is Pu Songling’s well-known tales of fox ghosts,⁴⁹ in which a young literati unwittingly happens upon a ghost mansion in the mountains or hills (usually at night), and in which he gets to know the fox woman intimately, just to realize in the end that she is a ghost and he does not know her

⁴⁸ *Zhiguai* and *Chuanqi* are both preoccupied with the strange. But in comparison, *chuanqi* tends to be more elaborate in plot and more adorned in style. It also shows stronger tendency to fictionalize, whereas *zhiguai* gives more emphasis to “*zhi*” (record) and is often unadorned and short. *Zhiguai* tends to be based on hearsay, false reports and is preoccupied particularly with supernatural or superstitious entities such as the fox ghosts. It is thus ranked even lower than *chuanqi* in a tradition that holds history as the most prestigious narrative genre and encourages educated distance to supernatural beings. Pu Songling (1640-1715) is the Qing dynasty author who wrote *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* (*liaozhai zhiyi*). His greatest contribution is to have combined the *chuanqi* and *zhiguai* genre to superb effect (see John Minford’s recent translation under the same title, Penguin, 2006). See Sing-chen Lydia Chiang, *Collecting the Self: Body and Identity in Strange Tale Collections of Late Imperial China* (2005) for a study on *chuanqi* and *zhiguai*.

at all. Zhang's novella deliberately uses the Pu Songling type of setting to facilitate a narrative of dual episteme: *The First Brazier* is also set in a mansion deep in the hills; at one place the novella, describing Weilong's impression of her aunt's mansion, explicitly compares the former to the ghostly mansions in Pu Songling's tales. But a crucial difference is, the mansion that Weilong visits is a real mansion on a hill in a real city, Hong Kong. *It is with reality, not a fantasy ghost world, that Zhang's protagonist is having the gothic experience.*

The environment that Weilong is to explore, "the reclusive quarters on Hong Kong's hills," proves both accessible and darkly inaccessible. The accessible parts have been discussed in the above section. The parts that prove inaccessible to Weilong's mind and psyche are first the eerily, ghostly eccentricity and shadiness of her aunt's world, then the sultry gloom of the hybrid boys and girls in her aunt's social circle (one of them is to become her fatal attraction), and finally the humid and ferocious tropical nights in Hong Kong's mountains. They fascinate Weilong while also overwhelm and confuse her, throwing her out of the epistemological and psychological security she otherwise possesses.

In a volume devoted to the gothic in view of its relevance in the modern context, Fred Botting argues that the gothic as both subject matter and cognitive mode pose many perceived threats to the safe and practical rationality of the bourgeoisie. It becomes the underbelly of modern literature that upholds Enlightenment and humanist values, being a mode that people in the modern period still turn to when they are faced with phenomena that can not be easily contained by the Enlightenment and humanism epistemes. These

⁴⁹Pu Songling's collection of ghost tales has long been considered a literary classic standing next to notable Chinese classics such as *Dream of the Red Chamber* and *Journey to the West* and is a familiar reading to

include “supernatural and natural forces, imaginative excesses and delusions, religious and human evil, social transgression, mental disintegration and spiritual corruption” (1-2) – in short anything too excessive and transgressive to be comfortably explained away, anything that falls outside of the snug and commonsensical world of the bourgeoisie.

As a narrative mode that has survived across the centuries, the gothic is not something monolithic. The gothic mode proves to be very adaptable to changes in people’s cognitions, morals, psychologies and even aesthetics and can take on varied models and shades.

Scholars on the evolution of the gothic mode in the history of Chinese culture have commented on the immense elasticity of the gothic genre. According to Judith Zeitlin, in Pu Songling’s masterpiece *Records of the Strange* (*Liaozhai zhiyi*), the concept of *qi* (the strange) is made quite elastic – it takes on moral, psychological and aesthetic dimensions and displays intriguing complexities.⁵⁰ In his hands, the “strange” has become a much more ambiguous category morally and aesthetically, bridging the legendary *and* the scandalous, the marvelous *and* the uncanny.

The First Brazier’s allusion to Pu Songling’s ghost stories is apt and telling, for the atmosphere that emanates from the new environment that Weilong is venturing into is of the same composite character.

anyone modestly educated in the classic.

⁵⁰Zeitlin points out that “the difficulty of pinpointing a clear or adequate definition of the strange poses a question: Is the strange definable? Or is the key quality of the strange its sheer elasticity, elusiveness, and changeability? It was early recognized in China that the strangeness of a thing depended not on the thing itself but on the subjective perception of its beholder or interpreter. The strange is thus a cultural construct created and constantly renewed through writing and reading; moreover, it is a psychological effect produced through literary or artistic means” (5-6).

The true character of Mrs. Liang's world is extremely complex, one that can be characterized as scandalously marvelous and fantastically ghostly. Like the mansion that *Liaozhai's* protagonist enters, which always lies in a ghostly retreat, cut off from the rest of the world, Madame Liang's mansion and its surroundings show a *Liaozhai* kind of isolation. It exudes a moral and physical atmosphere that not only distances Weilong from her familiar, ordinary reality and its practical and safe moral universe, but also eerily confuses Weilong's judgment and clarity of mind. It is an atmosphere that is both scandalous and marvelous, both sinister and fantastic.

There is no need to prove how morally sinister Madame Liang's world is and how it defies one's basic sense of propriety based on age, social position or familial kinship: Mrs. Liang is trying to turn her own niece into a high-class prostitute to make money and attract young men for herself. And she has at the end succeeded in doing that. But the same Mrs. Liang and her world are also "attractive" in a perverse manner.

This is Weilong's first glimpse at Madame Liang's face: "Now Weilong could see her face. She really was an older woman. There was a green-blue tinge to her white skin, and she wore the purple-black lipstick, the 'mulberry red' that was the latest thing from Paris." "Green-blue" tinge mixed with white and purple-black – if the word "beauty" can be used here, it is a kind that exudes attraction and horror at the same time, not unlike the feeling that the modern city invokes in the New Perceptionist writers. It captures a very complex response that the city and an utterly urban creature like Mme. Liang arouse in an ordinary urbanite: alienating but also alluring, repellent but also vaguely exciting.⁵¹

⁵¹As Fred Botting points out, "The emotions most associated with Gothic fiction are ... ambivalent: objects of terror and horror not only provoke repugnance, disgust and recoil, but also engage readers' interest, fascinating and attracting them" (9).

In view of the relevance of the gothic mode in the modern context, Fred Botting sums up the essence of the gothic as “a writing of excess” and defines the gothic by two key characteristics: “excess” and “transgression.” If rationality implies proportion and clarity, Botting suggest that the gothic mode is particularly apt at capturing excess, transgression of boundaries, and ambivalent meanings and emotions (1-13). It is thus highly relevant for situations when moral, spiritual and cognitive certainties are missing.

Indeed, “excess” and “transgression” not only characterize the moral character of the environment depicted by *The First Brazier*, but also its aesthetic character. At the opening of the novella, Weilong’s ordinariness is almost instantly drowned out by a plethora of unordinary and extraordinary things in the environment. After a lengthy description of what the protagonist sees – the English style garden, white marble fences, lush hills covered with wild azalea flowers, the narrator inserts the following comment: “[b]ut these glaring color clashes were not the only reason why the viewer felt such a dizzying sense of *unreality*. There were contrasts everywhere: all kinds of discordant settings and jumbled periods had been jammed together, making a *strange, illusory domain*” (Kingsbury 7, emphasis mine).

So right from the opening scene, Zhang has set the tone of her *chuanqi*: the “qi” in her novella is to be played out in all three of the word’s major connotations, including “qi” as in “qiyi” (different, extraordinary, outstanding, foreign, heterodox, eccentric), “qiguai” (anomalous, aberrant, deviant, bizarre, queer, outlandish) and “qimiao/qihuan” (marvelous, fantastic).⁵² In the process she has further stretched the category of *qi* in order to capture the complex aesthetic character of the new urban environment and its effect on the perceiver’s psyche.

What John Paul Riquelme says of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Grey* could also be applied to Zhang's *The First Brazier*: "Wilde simultaneously aestheticizes the gothic and gothicizes the aesthetic." Requelme finds such a "merger" "possible and inevitable," because "the tendency of gothic writing to present a fantastic world of indulgence and boundary-crossing" echoes "the tendency of the aesthetic . . . to press beyond conventional boundaries and to recognize terror within beauty" (355-356).

Haipai writers, from the decadent school to the New Perceptionists, having registered the influence of Western decadent aestheticism and modernism, were also practicing this kind of transgressing aestheticism: in their writings the aesthetic was used as a force to defy and cross conventional boundaries – be they moral, cultural or psychological.

Zhang has obviously picked up this modern urban aestheticism with all its psychological and cultural connotations. But the important difference is that she has balanced it with a deep understanding of the ordinary urbanite's episteme and psyche and their continuous reliance on the Chinese gothic narratives, *chuanqi*, to register experiences of excess and transgression. She combines all these to produce an aestheticized gothic and gothicized aestheticism of *the urbanite*.

Indeed, the effect of excess and transgression are subjective perceptions of the real. Somebody like Weilong's aunt could easily be found in the real city of Hong Kong or Shanghai, the architectural style that carries "all kinds of discordant settings and jumbled periods" was also not difficult to find in the rich districts of Hong Kong or Shanghai. Their surreal and fantastic effect owes largely to the naivety and inexperience of Weilong the perceiver: it is in the perception of Weilong, "the very ordinary" urbanite schoolgirl, that

⁵²This list is expanded based on Zeitlin's list in *Historian of the Strange*.

the world of Mrs. Liang feels unreal, surreal, disturbing and unsettling. In other words, just as “beauty is in the eyes of the perceiver,” *so is terror*. Zhang’s gothic writing becomes another way in which she tries to capture *the real as it is perceived by the embedded subjects*.

II. The real as science and art: the realist’s disenchantment and reenchancement with the world

In the above section I have pointed out Zhang’s deep connection to the urban genres that organize reality as sensations. But compared to the messy, labyrinthine narrative jumble that characterizes the Social Novel, and the verbal and sensuous montage that is characteristic of the New Sensationist writing, Zhang’s novella shows an epistemological and representational clarity and depth that is only to be found in *modern literary realism*.

If the *chuanqi* mode, as I have illustrated in the above section, reflects the perception of the real as shocking and extraordinary (that is, *sensational*) and as menacing and unintelligible (that is, *gothic*), then literary realism is characterized by an episteme that is quite the opposite: realism as a mode of writing is informed by the Enlightenment confidence in knowing and mastering the objective and subjective reality, its cognitive clarity and capacity further enhanced through its close relation to the modern sciences, especially social and psychological sciences.

For critics like Pam Morris, “literary realism” is, cognitively speaking, built on two central assumptions: 1) it is the belief in “knowledge and relative truth,” 2) and the belief

that literature and the secular form of knowledge that it attains and shares can facilitate the making of human community, in which people “communicate reasonably accurately with each other about the world and ourselves” (10). Realism as such is deemed an indispensable tool to the building of the modern nations and that of the modern civil society.⁵³

The last section shows that Zhang knows how urban reality feels to the embedded inhabitants of the city, who, with real desires and anxieties that color and distort their perceptions of reality, give “reality” a subjective touch. In this section I want to show that Zhang in the same novella also presents that same urban reality as it is perceived by someone with scientist-like detachment and objective understanding, someone who is not embedded in the reality under depiction, who is free of desire or anxiety, to whom reality is impersonal and transparent. This is what I call the realist episteme.

II.1 The real as science – the realist’s disenchantment with the world

If the novel of sensational realism serves to supplement what journalism cannot cover – such as the back alley scandals and private secrets behind closed doors, modern realism is also meant to offer what journalism cannot accomplish: it supplies the *intellectual vision* that yields insight and gives meaning to mere journalistic facts.

Indeed, during the immediate post-May Fourth period, the advocates of modern literary realism called for a different kind of writer – a writer who takes up the role of an organic intellectual, of social scientist, and of cultural critic and commentator. In this

⁵³See *An Intellectual History of Modern China* (ed. Goldman and Lee, 2002) and *Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture, and Translated Modernity* (1995) for investigation of the connection between

aspect literary realism in China had a profound link with the New Culture movement, in which literature was assigned a pivotal role in the project of social and cultural renewal.

Zhang Ailing, like many of those who were educated in the new public education system of Republican China, grew up in the legacy of the May Fourth and New Culture movement. As she confessed in an essay commemorating Hu Shi, for her generation the New Culture movement was forever in the background (“In Memory of Hu Shizhi” 1976). Zhang’s debut novella showed this intellectual and literary upbringing. In *The First Brazier* not only was Zhang impersonating *shanghairen* and writing an accessible text, she was also writing a literary text, interpreting reality with the detached and macro vision of a social scientist and cultural commentator.

A crucial difference between Zhang’s representation of urban reality in her story of Hong Kong and the Republican Social Novels’ representation of the city is that the latter often show their inability to master or penetrate the mystery of the city. As Zhou Shoujuan’s lamented in his preface for *Tides of Shanghai Harbor*, “people try to find out, to no avail, what actually happened and how.” Unaided by any totalistic imagination or systematic understanding of the workings of the modern big city, the Republican popular urban writers inevitably produced “monstrous” narratives that were often, in the case of *Tides of Shanghai Harbor* for example, made up of a chaotic collection of mutually unrelated scandals and anecdotes, mirroring the labyrinthine chaos of urban reality as it is perceived by the uneducated observers.

Zhang’s claim that she “wrote a Hong Kong *chuanqi* for *shanghairen*” shows that she was following the Social Novel tradition to promise and deliver the readers something

“real.” But what she provides in fact is not the raw messy monster of reality that is the real Hong Kong, but an intellectually interpreted Hong Kong – namely what Hong Kong *essentially* is according to the author’s vision, observation and abstraction.⁵⁴ This is how Zhang Ailing manages to represent “Hong Kong” within the meagre length of a novella whereas her popular counterparts had to use long and sprawling volumes to perform the same task.

In an essay written in the 1970s, Zhang made the following reflections on the Social Novel phenomenon:

At the peak of the Social Novel wave, major and small newspapers around the country rushed to publish several serializations in each of their supplements. Not counting the single volumes, those serializations alone made up a powerful current. What was the reason for this phenomenon? Was it perhaps that the change during the transitional period was too drastic; the masses were curious about their environment while fiction could not catch up with the fast-changing facts? It’s hard to say. *These novels did not necessarily reflect epochal change for their choice of topic and the materials often lacked selectivity.*⁵⁵

The vocabulary that she used for her analysis – “epoch” (*shidai*), “the masses” (*dazhong*) and “society” (*shehui*) – all reflect her instinctual mastery of the macro vision and the frame of thinking bred and spread by the New Culture movement and the New Literature.

Her diagnosis that the materials of social novels show “lack of selection” reveals her tacit acceptance of an important epistemological technique of modern realism: the

⁵⁴It is for this reason that some critics characterize literary realism as “systematic realism” (Stowe 1983). Stowe considers Balzac and Henry James as the prototypes for “systematic realism” as such which he defines in the following terms:

... both work methodically (systematically) to present a convincing picture of life in the world. Their realistic intention naturally lead them to describe and analyze systems of behavior, communication, exploitation, and so on, that structure the world, and to rely, consciously and unconsciously, upon these systems to help structure their texts and to provide them with figurative language. Finally, their desire to create literary analogues for life in the world leads them to elaborate textual systems of great complexity, of purposeful particularity, and of ample power both to reproduce something like the density and the texture of experience and to involve the reader in a active process of reading and interpretation (8).

realist novel of the post-May Fourth period shows its distinction from the Republican Social Novels in its utilization of the perspective of social science and its method of “sampling,” which uses typical or representative individual instances as the embodiments of generalities.

The opening passage of *The First Brazier*, which depicts the marvelously strange environment of Hong Kong’s residential hills, is concluded, for example, with the following comment: “The English come from so far to see China – one has to give them something of China to see. But this was China as Westerners imagine it: exquisite, illogical, very entertaining” (Kingsbury 8). With such comments, Zhang instantly places the individual setting in a larger reference frame. Here the mansion of Weilong’s aunt, as strange and extraordinary as it is, is not presented as a singular and isolated case in its own right, but as an extreme *example* of Hong Kong’s colonial culture and society – the vision of the *essence* of Hong Kong’s cultural and social character is reached through the confident judgment of the author as a cultural observer and social scientist.

The same approach is used on the main protagonist, Weilong. With a highly unusual, almost strange name (made of two Chinese characters that respectively mean “rose” and “dragon”), indicating that the author wants to present Weilong as a unique, particular individual, Weilong is nevertheless introduced as “a very ordinary Shanghai schoolgirl” – namely, introducing her in fact as the average, or typical, Shanghai schoolgirl. After presenting the mansion of Weilong’s aunt as a mirror of “Hong Kong,” the novella goes on to bestow upon Weilong a cluster of general social and cultural symbolisms:

Weilong glanced at her reflection in the glass doors – she too was a touch of *typically colonial Oriental color*. She wore the special uniform of Nanying

⁵⁵ “On Reading,” Zhang Ailing 295, translation and emphasis mine.

Secondary School . . . all in the late Qing style . . . Decking out coeds in the manner of Boxer-era courtesans – that was only one of the ways that the Hong Kong of the day tried to please European and American tourists Her face may have been somewhat lacking in expression, but vacuousness of that sort does impart the gentle sincerity that one associates with *Old China*. Once she'd been quite dissatisfied with her white skin; she'd wanted a tan, . . . But when she got to Hong Kong she found that the Cantonese beauties generally had olive complexions. Scarcity pushes value up: . . . One time somebody made a wisecrack, saying that if girls from Canton and Hunan, with their deep-set eyes and high cheeks, were sweet-and-sour pork bones, then *Shanghai girls* were flour-dipped pork dim sum . . . (Kingsbury 8-9, emphasis mine)

Although narrated in the tone and idioms of the petty urbanites, this paragraph can only be written by someone whose critical and cultural vision transcends the petty urbanite horizon. The author cleverly, in a very colloquial manner, endows her characters and story with a wider and deeper social and cultural *symbolism* – Weilong is made to register larger and abstract social and cultural identities such as the “colony,” the “old China” and “Shanghai girls.”

Such a social, cultural symbolism is rarely present in the urban popular literature, and it explains why Zhang's story of “Hong Kong” is so short compared to the urban popular writers' stories of “Shanghai.” Instead of an approximation of the city through a web of anecdotes, Zhang uses one anecdote – Weilong's adventure in her aunt's exotic circle – to illustrate what could happen when typical Shanghai characteristics are tested against Hong Kong's climate and Hong Kong's social and cultural environment. As a result, Weilong's individual *chuanqi* becomes a “Hong Kong *chuanqi* for the *shanghairen* reader” (“After all a Shanghainese” 1943), with clearly defined symbolic significance.⁵⁶

⁵⁶As to whether Zhang is adopting the method of typicality, and whether her story, like those of the May Fourth “social problem novel” (*wenti xiaoshuo*), aims to illustrate a social problem in order to suggest its solution, is another question, which will be addressed in the third section of this chapter. For now it suffices to recognize that Zhang's stories are endowed with a larger and deeper social and cultural symbolism, thanks to the author's having internalized the macro social and cultural intelligence informed by the perspectives of the new social sciences such as sociology and cultural anthropology.

Does such process of abstraction and symbolization bring an intellectualization of literature? The answer is yes. Intellectualization is indeed the first important distinction between the Old School (*jiu wenxue*) and the New School (*xin wenxue*). One of the results of such intellectualization is the *disenchantment* of the world: while understanding prevails, no mystery is left. Reality is no longer opaque and chaotic, but orderly and systematic, open and transparent to the penetrating and analytical intelligence of the intellectual.⁵⁷

II. 2 The real as life and art – the realist’s reenchantment with the world

If literary realism only provided the weapon of intellectualization, it could not have been such a significant – probably the most significant – literary movement of the modern period. Approaching the increasingly complex modern reality with the aid of socio-scientific vision is just one half of the realist legacy.

Indeed, where the realist novel reduces, abstracts and systematizes life, it gives *life* back somewhere else. Through the pursuit of the so-called “reality effects,” using representational techniques such as scenic writing and the limited narrative point of view, literary realism moves from the representation of reality toward the representation of the *experience* of reality. The latter leads to what Watt calls “realism of presentation” – “trying

⁵⁷New Literature’s first hallmark genre, the so-called “social problem novel” (*wenti xiaoshuo*) reflects such a paradigm shift: the New Literature’s “social problem novel” is not exposé for the sake of exposé, but to identify and analyze the societal issues behind a problematic phenomenon. Thus each *individual* story is made to symbolize a *generalizable* social issue. Although not necessarily using the concept of typicality, the stories of New Literature’s “social problem novel” are chosen or created for its ability to represent a general issue.

to show not necessarily how things really are, but how things are experienced, *what it feels like to be alive.*”⁵⁸

In the Western context, masters of literary realism like Henry James repeatedly expressed disappointment with contemporary novelists for their failure “to represent, to give [readers] the sense of life”⁵⁹. In the Chinese context, almost diametrically complementary to the scientific turn is the emphasis on literature as “art” (*yishu*). At the peak of the wave of the “social problem novel” (*wenti xiaoshuo*), Lu Xun made the observation that “those who look down on the branches and leaves certainly won’t get the flower or fruit.” Mao Dun and his Literary Association, after taking over the very popular *Fiction Monthly* (*xiaoshuo yuebao*), devoted itself to the creation of “literature as art” (*zuowei yishu de wenxue*) while advocating the role of writers as social and cultural critics. Mao Dun said pithily, for example, “literature is about ideas, that’s certainly right. But the constitution of literature relies all on art.”⁶⁰

Corresponding to such an understanding of the novel, the writers of modern realism adopted techniques which *formally* made it possible that the experience of reading a novel approximates almost the experience of life. These techniques include the individualization of details to go with the use of typicality, the *scenic* writing, and the point of view technique.

Mao Dun’s famous essay “Naturalism and the Modern Chinese Novel” (*ziran zhuyi yu zhongguo xiandai xiaoshuo*, 1922) is an exemplary articulation of these techniques,

⁵⁸Quoted in Lewis, p158, emphasis mine.

⁵⁹Quoted in Brooks 180.

⁶⁰“Manifesto for the Column of New Fictional Currents” (*Xiaoshuo xinchao lan xuanyan*) *Fiction Monthly* (*Xiaoshuo yuebao*) volume 11, issue#1, 1920, 1, 25.

which was given in the context of pointing out the “fatal shortcomings” of urban popular literature written in the old style.

One of Mao Dun’s accusations is that popular literature failed to depict things according to “actual observation” (*shidi guancha*), for there are, he argues, “not two flies in the universe that are exactly the same.”⁶¹ This emphasis implies that on the other side of the science and abstraction coin is the recognition of the uniqueness of the object under depiction, and the desire that literary writing should reproduce the unique individuality and liveliness of each item under depiction. In short, it is to create “reality effects” which cover up the fact that what is presented is not reality, but a fictional creation with a high level of abstraction and condensation.

Another of Mao Dun’s accusations was that traditional style popular literature failed to “represent an actual event in front of the reader’s ‘mental eyes’” (*shishi buneng zaixian yu duzhe de ‘xinyan’ zhiqian*).⁶² Indeed, one of the stylistic hallmarks of the works of Mao Dun and those of other authors of the Literary Association – the most successful realist group that, according to C.T. Hsia, has left the greatest impact on the modern Chinese novel – is the extensive use of what I call *scenic writing* rather than traditional *narration*, which creates an effect as if the event was unfolding “in front of the reader’s ‘mental eyes.’”

In contrast to the traditional narration mode, in which the event is *narrated as though it had already happened*, scenic writing presents characters’ external experience and internal states *scenically* – as if the settings and situations that have evoked those states were happening *now* before the reader, at the time of the reading. In other words, in modern

⁶¹Ibid, p18.

naturalist and realist writing, life is presented *as it happens to someone who is living it*. As a result, the setting, the physical appearance of a character, what he does, what he thinks and feels – in short, all the fictional data – are communicated through the consciousness of someone *present* at the scene.

This leads toward a foregrounding of the life process itself; and importantly to the *foregrounding of the observing and experiencing subject or consciousness*. It is a technique that gives almost equal weight to both the objective reality observed and the inner reality of the observing and experiencing subject.

This almost inevitably leads to the third technical hallmark of literary realism, the point of view technique. This technique is also often called “focalization” for the “events observed by a traditional omniscient narrator are said to be non-focalized, whereas events witnessed within the story's world from the constrained perspective of a single character are considered ‘internally focalized.’”⁶³ Reality presented this way is a reality as it is lived by someone from moment to moment, highly personal and intimate while not resorting to the first-person narrative.

Zhang is an excellent practitioner of all three of the above techniques. Let's look at a passage from *The First Brazier*, this time toward the closing of the story:

. . . Pushed back and forth by the crowd, she had a strange sensation. There overhead was a dark purple-blue, and the sea at the end of the winter sky was purple-blue too, but here in the bay was a place like this, a place teeming with people and lanterns and dazzling goods – blue ceramic double-handled flowerpot, rolls and rolls of scallion-green velvet brushed with gold, cellophane bags of Balinese Shrimp Crisps, amber-colored durian cakes from the tropics, Buddha-head bracelets with their big red

⁶²Yan Jiayan ed. *Theoretical Material on Twentieth Century Chinese Novel (ershi shiji zhongguo xiaoshuo lilun ziliao)*, Volume II, 1917-1927. Beijing University Press, 1997. p232.

⁶³ Refer to "focalization" *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*. Chris Baldick. Oxford University Press, 2008.

tassels, light yellow sachets, little crosses made of dark silver, coolie hats – and stretching out beyond these lights and people and market goods, the clear desolation of sea and sky; endless emptiness, endless terror. Her future was like that – it didn't bear thinking about about; if she did think, it was only endless terror. She had no lasting arrangement for her life. Her fearful, cringing heart could find a makeshift sort of rest only in little odds and ends, like these spread out before her. . . . (Kingsbury 73-74).

In this passage, all three of the technical hallmarks of literary realism are in practice. First, in this passage the external environment is very realistically and sensuously depicted – so individualized are the details that it almost tempts one to forget that it's actually fictional creation. Second, in this passage external reality is presented as it is experienced by Weilong, at the moment, present at the scene. This transports the reader to the here and now of the action, enables the reader to experience the scene as if it was unfolding, now, in front of his or her mental eyes. But if one savors the passage more closely, what lies beneath the whole passage is the reality of Weilong's inner life. Weilong's solitary consciousness is at the center of the scene and gives life and feeling to it. In other words the scene is *internally focalized*: all the external things, the market, the goods, the sky and the sea, are not only seen *through* the protagonist's eyes, their existence assumes its intense presence *because of* the latter's sudden epiphany-like inner clarity.

The result of such a technique is that the narrative force is concentrated not only on the world as it is experienced *by* the protagonist, it is also concentrated on the protagonist herself. Here the scenery not only evokes the protagonist's internal state – by the word “evoking” one still implies a relative independence and mutual confrontation between the objective and the subjective reality -- the whole scene is rather so conveyed that, as Henry

James describes the effect of his technique in *The Portrait of a Lady*, “its center is in the young woman’s own consciousness.”⁶⁴

Some critics, based on these features of Henry James’ novel -- those features are also manifest in the novels of Zhang Ailing -- recognize a “turn” in the history of the novel. “In fiction before James, the world predominates; in fiction after James, the mind predominates” (Meisel 79). The novel, by calling attention to the consciousness of the character in this way, makes each of its characters, no matter how minor and petty in social statues, a dignified human being with rich interiority and subtle inner life.

The great inward reality of Zhang’s *chuanqi* builds up a productive tension with the outward reality of the stories: beneath the strange and sensational minor characters and turns of plot is the world of the inner life of the main character, so intimate and minute that one starts to lose sight of the “strangeness” and the sensationalism of her experience and starts to develop an intimate empathy toward her – the kind of empathy that is usually reserved for people we *know* rather than people we do not know.

The effect of Zhang’s debut novella can then be summed up in the following terms: there is a scandal on the outside, but the reader is also led to the inside of the (scandalous) experience. The intimacy and immediacy achieved through the techniques of literary realism make the whole experience feel so human and relatable that the scandalous and sensational material starts to take on a familiarity and humanity that the readers usually associate with ordinary and familiar settings rather than with extraordinary and strange aspects of reality.

⁶⁴Quoted in Cohn, page 6.

Zhang has thus attained the goal laid out by the first half of the motto that she published on the title page of the first edition of *Chuanqi* (1944), “to seek ordinary people in *chuanqi*” (*zai chuanqi li xunzhao putong ren*). Later in her preface for *Zhang Ailing’s Short Stories* (1954), Zhang articulates the concept again in more detail:

... I believe this kind of story is worth writing about, but I may have done a bad job. Looking from a certain angle, the stories included here could be considered *chuanqi*, but these kinds of things are actually quite common. I hope that a reader, upon reading this book, would be reminded of someone he or she knows, or something he or she has seen or heard. I don’t remember whether it is *The Book of Analects* that contains this line: ‘when one gets to know the truth, one feels [pitying] sadness rather than [malicious] joy.’ These two lines left me with deep impression. When we get to know *the inside story of an incident, and the inward struggles of a person*, let’s also ‘feel [pitying] sadness rather than [malicious] joy.’⁶⁵

Although not speaking in the grand language often used by China’s literary realists, such as “common humanity” or “community,” Zhang is in this passage expressing a desire that is shared by literary realists: the best realist writer is usually a humanist; he or she hopes to help people reach intimate and deep understandings of fellow human beings, “strange” may they first appear.

Part III. The incomplete project of the real: post-realism as modernism

Moving beyond urban popular literature’s limits through literary realism, while recognizing what the former has to offer in regard to the “real,” proves Zhang a great “synthesizer” in the understanding and practice of “realism.” That alone is already a singular achievement in the history of modern Chinese literature. But Zhang has not stopped there – in her single-minded pursuit of the “real,” she ends up moving beyond

⁶⁵Zhang Ailing, Vol. IV, 264, translation and emphasis mine.

literary realism as well. In correcting literary realism's limits and failures in representing the real, she ends up entering the territory of the modernist.

In the above section I have discussed the legacy of literary realism from two dialectically complimentary directions: the disenchantment and re-enchantment with the world, the former referring to the penetration of social science thinking into literary realism's approach on reality, the latter referring to a counter-move that upholds the idea of art and life and power of affect in literature. In this section I want to point out that Zhang has used her own novelistic practice to show that in both of the above two directions literary realism has progressed as well as erred – and her overcoming and transcendence of literary realism's errors appears to stem from her desire to approximate the “real” in her novelistic art.

III. 1. Let the story speak for itself – post-realism as modernism

Zhang appeared to have considered “the real” as her primary responsibility as a novelist. The term repeatedly came up in the very few essays in which Zhang directly discussed her novelistic philosophy. In her now well-known essay “A Writing of One's Own” (1944), Zhang declared that those supposedly dislikable features in her writing had to be kept because they were closer to “the fact/truth” (*jiao jin shishi*), and she confessed that her desire was not to please any critics, but only to “write more realistically/truthfully” (*zhiqiu xie de zhenshi xie*).

Some thirty years later, in a long essay titled “On Reading” (1976) Zhang again expounded her worldview (as a reader and a novelist) around the notion of the real: using

the Western proverb “truth is stranger than fiction,” Zhang criticized most fictional art for its failure to deliver the “real” and confessed that her favorite readings, such as the Social Novel during her youth and documentary and anecdotal writings during her adulthood, all served to satisfy her lifelong love for *the touch of the real*.

These thoughts suggest a certain primitivist tendency in Zhang’s understanding of realism. While still driven by the realist impulse, Zhang’s actual understanding of the real shows a significant departure from the realist paradigm and has rather moved toward the realm of modernism.

Many definitions have been given on the term “modernism.” In the context of my discussion here, regarding the question of reality, I would use Michael Bell’s definition. Bell, following Heidegger, sees the relativistic consciousness as a defining characteristic of modernity, by which he means that the modernist generation, following developments in the natural sciences such as modern physics and the new human sciences such as anthropology, increasingly recognizes the multiplicity of worldviews and the relativity of their truth claims. This is in direct contrast to Enlightenment’s faith in the certainty of knowledge of the world and the faith in unilateral history and progress (Bell 1998).

Earlier I have discussed the intellectualization of literature and its manifestations in modern realism. But to be more exact, the manifestations vary and have resulted in slightly different kinds of realism: one is called naturalism, which truly used the findings of social sciences to interpret social reality. Another kind of literary realism is vaguer in its intellectual character. Such realist literature likes to borrow the wings of intellectualism but does not necessarily follow any scientific formula in its understanding of the world. What

exactly these writers use to interpret the world is any kind of combination between individual vision and the changing currents of philosophical and cultural thinking. Thus one witnessed a proliferation of schools and sects during the modern period, showing that literature has moved beyond the realm of common sense, and has entered the field of philosophical debates.

Where is Zhang in this picture? On one hand, Zhang is obviously benefiting from the intellectualization of literature, which in turn enables her to interpret reality from a more removed and macroscopic vantage point, which enables her to cut through the futile collection of facts and grasp the “essence” of a seemingly endlessly complex urban reality. On the other hand, it is highly unclear as to what philosophy or science Zhang is resorting to in her interpretation of reality.

According to her own confession, she does not like any systems of thought that provide read-to-use models for one’s understanding of the world. “The thing called reality is devoid of system or order ... [thus] any clear and resolute worldview, be it political or philosophical, is always a bit annoying” (“Notes amid the ashes” 1944).⁶⁶ This comment, included in the essay accounting for her experience in war-stricken Hong Kong, marked her coming-of-age as an independent thinker and writer. If this could be taken as Zhang’s “worldview,” it is a worldview that is against “worldview” as such.

To Zhang Ailing, realism is not just a question of subject matter and technique, but an epistemological attitude and ethos. The single-mindedness with which she pursues the

⁶⁶ Zhang Ailing Vol. IV, 53, my translation.

“life-like” reality for its own sake leads her to breach with a whole series of elements that interfere with it – almost to the point of total reappraisal of the realist tradition.

What Zhang was really cautious about is the way that our minds and emotions or our representation of people’s minds and emotions do not follow reality itself, but follow instead “ready-made trenches” (*xiancheng de gouqu* “On Reading” 1976)⁶⁷ that humans have grown used to – be they common morality, political ideology, or culture,

In an uncanny coincidence, Henry James, the transitional figure from high realism to modernism, shares the same sentiment. In his account of the creative process behind *The Americans*, he declared with some satisfaction that “[w]hat I have recognized then in *The Americans*, much to my surprise and after long years, is that the experience here presented is the disconnected and uncontrolled experience – *uncontrolled by our general sense of ‘the way things happen’*” (emphasis mine)⁶⁸.

Such an alert epistemological reflexivity is an important mark of the *modernist episteme*, which, while being rational and analytical and in pursuit of “truth,” does not blindly follow accepted truths – religious, philosophical and even scientific truths. This makes the modernist very different from the 19th century realists.

Indeed, the epistemological skepticism originally cultivated by the spirit of the Enlightenment, is developed to a point that it starts to turn the Enlightenment on its own head. In the context of modern Chinese history, May Fourth as a movement of thought is very much informed by the spirit of the Enlightenment. The writers and theorists of the May Fourth generation desire to create a literature that would foster critical cultural

⁶⁷ Zhang Ailing Vol. IV, 292, my translation.

thinking – a popular slogan at the time was “does ‘always been so’ make it all right?”(*conglai ruci, bianshi dui de me*).

However, the same movement, having once become the established cultural institution, causes Zhang Ailing to have the following sentiment:

Grand symphony . . . reminds me of the May Fourth movement, . . . merging each person’s voice into this one voice, . . . each person, upon opening his/her mouth is now shocked by the deep and far reach of one’s voice . . . (but) can’t quite tell if it’s one’s own self talking, or someone else is – an experience of a hard-to-describe terror” (“On Music” 1944).⁶⁹

The reason for such a sentiment is not hard to find. It is because the May Fourth ideologies soon became something taken for granted, namely, became an “always been so” itself. The New Culture movement, iconoclastic in spirit at the beginning, which to an extent managed to shatter the authority of the traditional Chinese values, soon introduced another set of a priori values that subsequently developed into a new moral system and new orthodoxy.

Although the revision of the May Fourth legacy is the preoccupation of both the leftist and the liberal literary circles during the Sino-Japanese war period,⁷⁰ it is rare to encounter an observation of the May Fourth tradition from a perspective like Zhang’s. Zhang Ailing’s seemingly emotional outcry above has actually a very profound epistemological intention: it expresses the desire and need of a novelist to break free from these established systems, and to make one’s writing free and uninhibited, true again to nothing but “reality.” Piecing this together with Zhang’s comment on “ready-made trenches,” one can say that Zhang Ailing shares the modernist realist’s attitude: a truly enlightened, modernist realist does not even follow the values and doctrines of the

⁶⁸James, “Preface” to *The American* (1877); first printed in the New York edition of the *Novels and Stories* (1907-1917), Vol. II. Collected in *Novelists on the Novel* under the title “Cutting the Cable.”

⁶⁹Zhang Ailing, Vol. 4, 164, my translation.

Enlightenment movement that gave rise to literary realism in the first place. It follows nothing but the real.

Indeed, Zhang's novelistic writing never showed the adoption of a ready-made system of thought that offers schematic answers to reality. The experience of a quintessential "realist" like Mao Dun, who decided to write *Midnight* after reading Marx's *Capital* and conceived his novel using Marx's views on capitalism,⁷¹ was not to be found in Zhang Ailing.⁷² Not only did she refuse to believe in any systematic answer to the chaos called reality ("Notes amid the ashes" 1944), she even moved to rid her works of "theme" (*zhuti*) – be it the ideological kind or the moral kind.

In an analysis of the three well known works featuring the popular "fallen woman" trope – Zhang Henshui's best-selling *Fate in Tears and Laughter* (*Tixiao Yiyuan*, 1929-1930), New Literature playwright Cao Yu's widely staged *Sunrise* (1935), and Zhang Ailing's *The First Brazier* (1943) – the Chinese scholar Xu Zidong makes the point that Zhang was not interested in teaching a "lesson" as the other two writers appeared to. The way she structured the story shows that she was merely interested in telling the "truth" – or, using Zhang's own modest words, telling "the story" as it was and "letting the story speak for itself" ("A writing of one's own" 1944).

As Xu rightly observes, Cao Yu's story focuses on depicting the sinful and corrupted life of the female protagonist *after* her fall from original innocence. Such a

⁷⁰See Epilogue of this thesis for more details on the war-time revisionist currents.

⁷¹"How did I write *Midnight*" (*ziye shi zenyang xiecheng de*, 1939), collected in Qian Liqun ed. *Theoretical Material on Twentieth Century Chinese Novel (ershi shiji zhongguo xiaoshuo lilun ziliao)*, Vol. IV, Beijing University Press, 1997. 44-48.

narrative structure, leaving the process of her “fall” and the inner processes that she as an individual goes through completely untold, makes the reader wonder what leads the obviously lovely young woman into the state she ends in. The text then offers ample hints to the “society” in which she lives – an “evil” society, as the author paints for us, that is made of cold-blooded venture capitalists, people-trading street tyrants, covetous lackeys of the rich and powerful, overworked and suicidal office clerks, low class prostitutes and orphans. The woman’s supposed, but never described, innocence being juxtaposed to such a dark background suggests the interpretation that it is the evil society that has caused her fall.

Cao Yu’s treatment of the “fallen woman” trope thus shows the dictation of the progressive culture that had formed in the post-May Fourth decades among the educated and urban youth: problems in society were understood in terms of *social* rather than *individual* causation. Writers following this culture assumed a causal relationship between individual behavior and “society” – accepting the notion of society in social science as an all-embracing, determining system.

Xu notices that Zhang Henshui records the “fall” of the young woman even-handedly, describing both the “before” and “after” in minute details. What happens “before” the girl’s fall is something that is first enviable and then fearful to the urban common readers: an ordinary girl from a petty urbanite family named Shen Fengxi strikes great “fortune” by her sheer beauty and loveliness, she is taken into the patronage of a gentry scion who is also a young college student, and even sent to school by the latter. But this girl grows greedy and corrupted enough in the new fashioned school to be finally

⁷²The only exception seems to be Freud and Freudianism. But even in that, Zhang’s take is highly individual.

tempted by the offer of millions of bank notes from a warlord, and has thus betrayed her pure and kind gentry student lover. What happens “after” is full of moral retribution: the young woman ends up being abused by her rich and vulgar captor and is driven into madness under physical abuse and sheer regret.

Zhang Henshui’s treatment of the “fallen woman” trope follows the dictation of the petty urbanite psychology and morality: the “before” plot echoes their hope of social mobility, the “after” plot confirms their suspicion and fear of the world beyond their familiar circle. The urban common readers, many not having much fortune to strike, could now feel lucky about their plain life and even feel a little superiority (pity mixed with moral condemnation) toward the girl – “thank Heavens I am not like her.”

Zhang Ailing’s treatment of the “fallen woman” theme in *The First Brazier* is neither confirming the socialist ideology nor the petty urbanite morality. It unfolds, instead, according to the way that things *actually* happen in real life, according to the way humans actually behave.

Zhang’s narrative decidedly emphasizes the “before.” All the crucial turns, in which the protagonist gives in to temptation, are described with candid psychological observation and non-judging objectivity. According to Zhang’s way of telling the story, the young woman’s “fall” is not fully attributed to “society” – although Weilong’s aunt is calculating and very shrewd in setting traps, she is not depicted as coercive; and Weilong the worldly smart Shanghai girl, as Zhang depicts her, is from the start very cautious of the dangers of this woman. Neither is Weilong’s “fall” a simple matter of moral responsibility:

unlike Shen Fengxi, who gives in to temptation through her covetous calculations, Weilong is in her rational thinking determined to resist the dangers of corruption.

The “inside story” (*nei qing*) of Weilong’s fall turns out to be a very human one: it is because of love – Weilong has fallen in love with a mixed race young man who frequents her aunt’s social circle and has decided to stay in her aunt’s evil world for the sake of her love. It is a love that is neither evil nor pure, just love as it is among many modern humans – a mixture of heart-felt feeling and carnal desire, of sincerity and artificiality, of truthful impulse and manipulative delusion.

To Fu Lei’s accusation that Zhang’s story lacks critical stance, she responded by saying that writing the way she did was “closer to reality.” She even went on to propose that “maybe the theme of literature could be improved a bit. Writing a novel should be telling a story and letting the story speak for itself. This is better than deciding the theme first and then making up the story. ... [when one writes this way] every inch of the novel feels alive” (“A writing of one’s own”).⁷³

Zhang’s single-minded pursuit of the real not only leads her to review literary realism’s ideological, cultural and epistemological baggage. Even in the practice of realism as a *formal* art, for example in regard to the “the reality effects” that I have discussed earlier, Zhang has also broken away from her literary realism predecessors.

Jaroslav Průšek once pointed out that the Chinese writers’ use of the scenic writing and the point of view technique, or, at least as it was commonly practiced by the Literary Association writers and their followers, leaned less toward defining the moral and

psychological condition of the protagonist, but rather served a lyrical ethos that combined the China's own lyric tradition with that of European Romanticism. Such lyricized and sentimental "realism," as practiced by Literary Association writers in the representation of social beings, and by the Creation Society in the representation of the self, ended up leaving the deepest impact on modern Chinese literature since the 1920s. It was so prevalently used by amateur literary youth everywhere that it became part of what was called "New Literature cliché" (*xin wenyi landiao*) since the 1930s.

The flair of lyricized realism continued into the early 1940s when Zhang Ailing was practicing writing. Paging through *Panorama* and *The Journal*, the two literary journals in which Zhang Ailing published most of her fictional works, one is astonished by the prevalence of various vulgar and shallow versions of the lyricized realism using the scenic writing and the focalization techniques. In fact, young Zhang Ailing, being a keen follower of the literary trends of her time, was not a foreigner to this technique. Her first practice of New Literature, a published short story titled "Cow" (*Niu*, 1936), was written almost entirely in the vulgar mode of the lyricized realism practiced by the Literary Association. The key features of this lyricized realism could be observed from the opening passage of "Cow":

Holding the tobacco pipe in his mouth and one hand on his waist, Lu Xing is standing by the gate. The rain has just stopped, wet thatch on the roof is dripping bright drops of water. On the ground, green water wells in deep or shallow yellow mud puddles ... The wind that blows in one's face still feels ice cold, but, compared to the winter, it starts to have a smell of the green grass.⁷⁴

⁷³Zhang Ailing, Vol IV, 175, my translation.

⁷⁴Zhang Ailing, vol. I, 49, my translation.

In this passage the scenery, although introduced through the perception and consciousness of the protagonist, does not necessarily show the psychological state of the protagonist. *It is rather the author's own lyric sentiments projected as the point of view of someone in the story – here it happens to be a peasant.* The point of view, technically speaking, is the protagonist's. But the subjectivity, obviously very sentimental, is actually *the author's*. As a result, the peasant is endowed with a subtle and sensitive humanity, but a humanity not entirely his own.

The reaction against a sentimental realism as such means then a two-fold task: externally it means caution against imposing the author's sensibility and reflexes on the characters, and effort at true "objectivity"; internally it means a presentation of interiority that breaks away from any sentimental conception of the self and subjectivity.

The external task is easier to accomplish. Compared to the lyric realism of her youth, in which the author lends the ordinary protagonists her own sensibilities and thus "beautifying" and "lyricizing" them, the protagonists of Zhang's mature works in the 1940s gain a dignified humanity *by simply being themselves*. In the scene quoted in the last section, Weilong, while feeling an instant of intense emptiness, nevertheless finds solace and comfort in the little goodies on the market – a psychological response perfectly befitting a young petty urbanite girl. In that scene the point of view technique goes beyond the technical – it is *truly* the point of view of a petty urbanite character, who takes special notice of and delight in the thingness of the world, whose horizon of vision is limited and anchored by the concrete, tangible world of everyday objects.

In other words, while richer inner life and greater dignity are endowed upon Zhang's protagonist by way of the novelist's intense immersion in the character's inner life,

the dignity does not come from without -- it is based on *the way the character truly is*. And the author, by fully embracing such a “petty” humanity with utter tenderness, empathy and understanding, is tempting a *modernist humanism* – it is humanism without ideological and ethical idealism.

III. 2 The real is stranger than fiction – *chuanqi* and the modernist celebration of unintelligibility

Paring away all hindrances and “ready-made trenches” that prevent her from following reality and its truth allows Zhang to break away from many of the traps that literary realism has fallen into. It does not mean that Zhang believes that she herself has found or is able to find the “truth.” On the contrary, Zhang sounds even more like an honest realist when she expresses the sentiment that the real truth – regarding an objective situation or regarding the subjectivity of a character – is very often unattainable.

The following quote from Zhang’s essay “On Reading” (1976) could be used as a description of Zhang’s debut novella, for the novella is so focused on how things actually happen in real life that it does not lend itself to any single interpretation of cause and effect. This will not bother Zhang, for she obviously does not consider truth as incompatible with unintelligibility or the unknown.

The endless web of cause and effect is like a bundle of tangled threads. If one thread gets pulled, the whole bundle moves -- one could hear many overtones, could feel the depth and the width [of the cause/effect web] as well as the touch of realness. . . . I think this is what the Western aphorism means by ‘the ring of truth’ -- or ‘the metal and stone of truth’ . . . Given that it feels real to anyone who hears it, why would one again say that ‘the real is stranger than fiction?’ – Isn’t that self-contradictory? The reason [I

believe] is that there is too much inside story that we don't know, especially the determining factor which is almost always beyond our knowledge. Thus things always turn out to exceed our expectations.⁷⁵

By an uncanny coincidence, one of Zhang's favorite authors, D. H. Lawrence, said something very similar: "The novel is the highest complex of subtle inter-relatedness that man has discovered. Everything is true in its own time, place, circumstance, and untrue outside of its own time, place, circumstance" (172).

In the very sophisticated, and honest, understanding of the "real" including its complexity, unintelligibility, mystery and "strangeness," Zhang and other modernists like Lawrence have done away with the optimistic, Enlightenment belief that gave rise to literary realism in the first place: that is, the belief in the knowability of the world, or the belief in the attainability of "truth."

No longer sharing those beliefs, modernist novelists find the lack of certainty both unsettling and liberating. For someone like Lawrence, it means to become more honest with one's experience of life and the world. According to Lawrence's commentators, one central theme of his critical work is "the criticism of a kind of mentality that governs and values experience according to a prescription of principles."⁷⁶ Instead, Lawrence treats the whole creative enterprise as "exploratory and unfinalised."⁷⁷ In *Literature, Modernism and Myth* Michael Bell uses "myth" to refer to the *anti-foundational element* that he finds in a whole spectrum of modernist writers, who share the same kind of relativism and feel the same sense of liberation – D. H. Lawrence is one of the writers that Bell has closely studied.

⁷⁵ Zhang Ailing, Vol. IV, 296, my translation.

⁷⁶ Margaret Buckley and Brian Buckley, *Challenge and Continuity: Aspects of the Thematic Novel 1830-1950*, p3.

While not sure whether this anti-foundational impulse has become a new metaphysics (as Bell seems to argue), it is certain that this has greatly liberated Zhang the novelist in her pursuit of the “real.” In Zhang’s case the modernist epistemological stance paradoxically finds affinity with a very old concept – *chuanqi*, or what she means by “strange” when she says “the truth is stranger than fiction.”⁷⁸ Just as Zhang’s commitment to the real finally makes her turn her back on the orthodox literary realism, her pursuit of the real also leads her to conceive a modernist understanding of *chuanqi*. *In the final analysis, what is “strange” and “chuanqi” for Zhang is not how morally outrageous and socially extraordinary the characters or the circumstances are – although Zhang does need those elements to make the story worth telling to her urbanite readers – but how far the story has led her and the reader to the unknown.*

The following quote could be looked at as a “manifesto” of Zhang’s modernist novelistic philosophy, which has also implied the place and value of *chuanqi* in that philosophy.

. . . The harmony that the Chinese have with their cultural background is probably the greatest among nations so that the individual is often hidden behind the cultural pattern, and the individual’s life often evolves around all kinds of “should”. This is also reflected in literature, in that morality often takes the foreground and all feelings follow ready-made trenches, so that one rarely touches the unfathomable depths of humanity. There is no denying that there are right-and-wrong and black-and-white in good literature, but these are a part of the whole effect, not something separate . . . I think these are basically two ways that literature communicates to our heart: one is that the writer’s material might be ordinary, but the writer can

⁷⁷ Buckley, *Ibid*, p2.

⁷⁸ Many writers have commented on this theme, but each has his/her own view, interestingly corresponding to the rest of their philosophy. Aldous Huxley, one of Zhang’s professed favorites, said the following about “reality”: “However queer the picture is, it can never be half so add as the original reality. We take it all for granted; but the moment you start thinking, it becomes queer. And the more you think, the queerer it grows. That’s what I want to get in this book – the astonishingness of the most obvious things.” Aldous Huxley, *Point Counter Point* (1928), *chapter xiv*.

write things that others never did and make the reader say ‘it is indeed so.’ Or the subject might be rare, but the reader says quietly after reading, ‘these things do happen.’ Both are exploring on the frontiers of the human experience, the frontiers having their own laws. . . .⁷⁹

Clearly Zhang the modernist novelist has set her eyes on the “frontiers of humanity and human experience” (*renlei jingyan de bianjiang*), which she designates here as the mission of all great literature. In this lies the answer to the question “why does the ‘strange real’ (stranger than fiction) fascinate Zhang?” The answer is clear now: because it leads her to the above-named “frontiers.”

Now I can finally come to articulate what “*chuanqi*” is doing in the work of Zhang the modernist “realist.” On one level, “*chuanqi*” refers to *the anecdotal kernel* from which Zhang works out her novelistic creation. Instead of starting with an abstract idea or a system of thought (as is the case with Mao Dun’s conception of *Midnight*), Zhang chooses to start with something raw and whole, such as an anecdote or a “story.”

As Zhang confessed, she liked to read Social Novels when she was young and enjoyed reading non-fiction in her later years, both because she just wanted to read about some real people and some real incidents (*zhenren zhenshi*) instead of literary art (*wenyi*). Zhang claimed that this reading taste has never changed. In the following quote Zhang explains the reason for such a “taste”:

Of course the real incident is just the raw material [for my fiction]. I love the raw material so much not because I ‘respect truth, but because I am addicted to a certain quality [in the raw material] that is the touch of life. And this quality is as fragile as a plant, which easily demises if it is not properly transplanted.⁸⁰

Here Zhang the novelist has made very clear what “raw material” means to her – the life of her fiction does not lie in the creative transformation that she brings to these raw

⁷⁹Zhang Ailing, Vol. IV, 292, my translation.

materials, but it lies in the raw materials *themselves*. In a sense Zhang is practicing “primitivist” philosophy in the field of novel writing: like Shen Congwen, Zhang Ailing desires to restore the uncouth *touch of the real* to the novel and both like to call their fiction by the name of “story.”⁸¹

This kind of primitivism is not “primitive,” it actually requires a high degree of vigilance and sophistication; it takes an artist’s deliberate, artful shunning of intellectualism and artifice, demanding one to fend off the external dictates as well as one’s own urge to create and judge. The anecdotal kernel also solves a technical problem: namely, if there is no lesson or message behind her story, the writer has to make sure that there is something intrinsic to the story itself that justifies its telling.⁸² Something that is, for example, *chuanqi*: extraordinary, strange, curious, fascinating, in short, something of *interest*.

So the real that is stranger than fiction is valued by Zhang the novelist for the above two reasons: it is raw material that promises the touch of the real life in a finished artistic product; it also refers to the core of a “story” – something strange or larger than life, something that never loses its fascination as long as humans remain a story-telling species.

⁸⁰ Zhang Ailing, Vol. IV, 296, my translation.

⁸¹ See the Epilogue for a more detailed account on the significance of the turn to “story.”

⁸² Thomas Hardy’s solution to the same problem is:

“A story must be exceptional enough to justify its telling. We tale-tellers are all Ancient Mariners, and none of us is warranted in stopping Wedding Guests (in other words, the hurrying public) unless he has something more unusual to relate than the ordinary experience of every average man and woman. . . . The whole secret of fiction and the drama – in the constructional part – lies in the adjustment of thing unusual to thing eternal and universal. *The writer who knows exactly how exceptional, and how non-exceptional, his events should be made, possesses the key to the art*” (Allott 58, emphasis mine).

Now look at Dostoevsky’s solution:

“In any newspaper one takes up, one comes across reports of wholly authentic facts, which nevertheless strike one as extraordinary. Our writers regard them as fantastic, and take no account of them; and yet they are the truth, for they are facts. But who troubles to observe, record, describe them? They happen every day and every moment, therefore they are not ‘exceptional’ . . .” (Allott 68).

On another level, a level that is at the *end* rather than the beginning of the creative process, “*chuanqi*” refers to the strange places that the novelist is heading to – namely, what Zhang calls “the *frontiers* of human experience.” Zhang’s open embrace of the strange in the real is meant to make sure that the story will not be ruled by any conventional, preconceived principle regarding how things should happen, and that it will be realistic and truthful, not afraid to venture into uncharted territories. This, I believe, is what she meant by the second half of *Chuanqi*’s front-page motto: “seek *chuanqi* in ordinary people” (*zai putong ren li xunzhao chuanqi*, the first half is “seeking ordinary people in *chuanqi*”).

The effect of Zhang’s debut novella *The First Brazier* feels indeed both realistic and strange, both ordinary/logical, and extraordinary/illogical. On one hand Weilong’s experience and transformation feel very real and believable, for she is after all “a very ordinary Shanghai schoolgirl” and her humanity is like the next person’s (the “ordinary people” part). In this there is a crucial difference between Zhang’s *chuanqi* and those written by the New Perceptionists, who strive for the frontier material and the exceptional experience for the sake of it, to the point of courting the utterly eccentric as long as it is authentic.⁸³

⁸³There is a quiet, but revolutionary, shift here. The “real” of realism includes an emphasis on the essential, the universal, or the universal as manifested in the particular. And it comes with a devotion to “the ordinary” – another baggage of realism. But the search for “authenticity” is something else. The New Sensationalist, or the whole school that worked outside of the Literary Society “main stream” – from Yu Dafu to all Freudian writers, is a line of novelistic practice that follows the impulse for the “authentic” but often ends up with the “eccentric” -- a form of eccentric that sometimes is not even “sensational,” meaning too private and idiosyncratic, not socially interesting.

Zhang is quite familiar with the New Sensationalist, and claimed that she was very familiar with Mu Shiying’s “South and North Pole.” In Zhang’s works one sees both kinds of the “uncommon” – some are sensational; some are uncommon, but not sensational, just eccentric. But in both kinds of stories, Zhang has tried and succeeded in finding the “ordinary man” – the human truth.

On the other hand the place that Weilong finally reaches is strange and surprising even to those who assume that they have seen and understood this kind of experience. In the latter part of Weilong's story Zhang has indeed touched "the unfathomable depth of humanity" and has ventured into "the frontier of the human experience." What happens later in *The First Brazier* is that the very extraordinary environment and its atmosphere act upon Weilong "the very ordinary Shanghai school girl" and at last starts to enter her being; or, it might also be the case that something in her being (for that matter in any human being) waits for such an environment to awaken them.

Weilong's ambivalent adventure into a morally and aesthetically ambivalent environment is meant to become a process of "dark enlightenment": in this process she will unwittingly encounter and experience things that an ordinary schoolgirl will never dream of encountering and experiencing and will therefore grow. But it is a process of "growth" and "enlightenment" that will not lead to -- as real enlightenment is supposed to -- increasing knowledge of the world and self, but a knowledge of the *unintelligibility of the world and self*.

One of the challenges that Zhang has set her fiction -- not to follow "ready-made trenches" -- means in the realm of characterization that she has to break away from any sentimental conception of self and subjectivity. In the essay "On Reading," Zhang Ailing made explicit comment on psychological realism, asserting that depth technique does not guarantee actual psychological depth in a novel's characterization:

. . . [But] vertical depth does not necessarily mean [psychological] penetration. Psychological depiction in its relatively naïve stage was just an expression of *sentimentalism*. Later it was mostly used for giving away motivations and thoughts from the *author's point of view*. . . . Because it is

processed, extroverted and is meant to convince others, it is no longer depicting *the actual* state of people's inner lives.⁸⁴

Following Zhang's logic here, the *technique* of psychological realism does not guarantee that one is able to depict the *actual (benlai)* state of the character's inner life – obviously assuming the depiction of “the *actual* state of character's inner life” as the goal of a novelist. In trying to do that, the modernist writers actually ended up reappraising the idea of the self, not only in relation to the artist as discussed above, but also in relation to the idea of character in fiction.

In Zhang's depiction of Weilong and her transformation she has abandoned safe and ready-made models of self and subjectivity and has shown readiness to just to follow the “real,” sometimes to uncharted and unknown places.

Earlier I have discussed how Zhang Ailing uses the gothic mode to capture Weilong's reaction to the inaccessible parts of the new urban environment. But the ultimate inaccessible part turns out to be Weilong herself. She does not understand the “violent passion” that awakes in her toward Qi Qiqiao, the mixed race young man -- something that is both wonderfully exciting but also alien and frightening to an otherwise collected and practical Shanghai girl. Adding to the mystery, she doesn't know from whence the violent passion comes.

Didn't I say that this novella is about the environment? It appears that half way through the novella, Zhang has turned the gothic mode to the use of modernism, and has turned from the unknown external environment to the unknown world within. Like other modernists, Zhang views the deepest forces in our psyche -- call it the unconscious, the id, the libido, or what her favorite author, D. H. Lawrence, refers to as “the blood

⁸⁴ Zhang Ailing, Vol. IV, 301, translation and emphasis mine.

consciousness” -- as something mysterious and impersonal, something that links human beings to the dark elements in nature. To face that part of oneself almost feels like confronting something objective and alien, an experience similar to that one may have with an impenetrable, unknown environment. What has happened to Weilong is exactly that story. She finds that something deep inside her is as vibrant, violent and alien as the tropical vegetation in the mountains of Hong Kong, which “growing too fast and spreading too rapidly,” exudes an “ominous” smell, “with a whiff of something like blood in the air.”

Michael Levenson’s observation is quite true that “in any description of the modernist temper” “these two moments -- the innermost core or the outermost boundary – must figure prominently” (Levenson 9). Indeed, *The First Brazier* is ultimately about the echo between “the innermost core” in Weilong and “the outermost boundary” that she has ventured into. It is a novella about the “frontier” in dual senses of the word: Weilong’s journey to the dark hills of Hong Kong turns into a journey to the unknown landscape inside herself.

In addition to the dialectic that Levenson points out, I want to add another modernist dialectic that is also reflected in Zhang’s novella: it is, epistemologically speaking, *a paradoxical urge to know the unknowable and represent the unrepresentable*. For that purpose the gothic, as both an epistemological mode and a representational aesthetics (*The First Brazier* is characterized by a style where the language, in an almost baroque over-abundance, tries to capture and contain the overwhelming object) proves a highly necessary complement to the realist mode.

The unknown that Zhang Ailing explores in the novella not only bears a modernist imprint but also borders on the postmodern. The most illuminating and iconographical moment in the text is when Weilong has a confrontation with Qiao Qiqiao on the misty hills of Hong Kong. There, with the impenetrable nature outside, and the alien, violent passion within, Weilong comes to encounter a third unknown, the object of her passion, Qiao Qiqiao. Qiao Qiqiao, as the tautological name indicates, embodies a postmodern hybridity that, for its sheer lack of depth and identity, reaches the point of non-being. He shows no concern for the past or the future and lives moment by moment in a perpetual present. When Weilong realizes the void that he represents she experiences the deepest despair and confusion in the course of the whole novella:

Weilong grabbed his coat collar, lifted her eyes, and stared into his face imploringly. She tried as hard as she could to find his eyes behind the dark lenses, but all she could see there was her own pale, shrunken reflection. She searched for a long time, then suddenly dropped her gaze (Kingsbury 55).

Upon that she breaks down and starts to “tremble so violently that he could not hold her still.” This passage is the best illustration of the novella’s profound realism: in a sense the modernists have followed the realist desire to its logical end; at that end they realize that myth, mystery and even postmodern nihilism are not contradictory to enlightenment.

Indeed, Zhang’s modernist taste for “the frontier in human experience” has found uncanny affinity with the gothic – the gothic effect depends on one hand on the extraordinary, highly portentous environment, on the other hand it depends on the relatively gullible, highly susceptible, even unstable subject.⁸⁵ The process of such a gothic

⁸⁵A certain kind of subject is one of the conditions for the gothic experience. According to Virginia Woolf, “Henry James has only to take the smallest of steps and he is over the border. His characters with their

“enlightenment” is “dark” because it runs completely counter to two fundamental beliefs of enlightenment – that is, the optimistic belief in the *intelligibility* of the world, and the belief in the enlightened, autonomous individual, who is able to know reality and self and capable of *self-determination* in a shiftless reality.

By now it’s almost a full circle: the trajectory of realism has moved from realism’s upholding of intellectualism to the true realist’s educated skepticism about the complacent all-knowingness. Then we are welcomed to a modernist’s “realism” in which the writer as intellectual has mutated into the literary detective who is humbled and fascinated by the things we don’t know; who is not thrilled by finding the “truth,” but feels wonder and awe at the marvelous and strange complexity, and even mystery and unintelligibility, of humanity and human experiences. – To the point that sometimes we feel as if we were “regressing” toward the Dark Ages when humans lived in awe, bewilderment and fear rather than knowingness, matter-of-fact-ness and self-assurance. In terms of orthodox realism, this is no longer the original realism we know. But, in terms of the pursuit of the “real,” this is the most advanced step that has been made to date.

Chapter Two

Modern Love: Urban Individualisms, Self-Pathologies and the Necessity of Romance

Almost all major works of Zhang Ailing are about love and marriage. Among them *Love in the Fallen City* is probably the only story that is entirely centered on the subject of “love” – the novella’s title being the best indication. *Love* is also the most staged and filmed – thus the most popular – of Zhang’s major novellas.⁸⁶ It also attracted the first major criticism to Zhang’s works from the elitist critics – notably from Fu Lei in 1944, over which Zhang elaborated her only manifesto as a writer, announcing that her intention was to create “truthful” characters that represent “the totality of our era” (“A writing of one’s own,” 1944).

Can a story about love capture “the totality” of the modern era? It might. Beside the obsession with “the real,” preoccupation with “love” is probably another paramount feature of modern (Chinese) literature and culture. It is also one common denominator that connects the two ends of the great divide – both New Literature writers and writers of urban popular literature were preoccupied with this subject. In terms of reading market, be it the sentimental novel (*yanqing xiaoshuo*) of the Mandarin Ducks and Butterfly school, or Zhang Ziping’s new erotic tales, or the post-May Fourth “revolution plus love” (*geming jia lianai*) literature, “love” always sells. “Love” is one of the dominant signs, if one will, of the modern experience.

⁸⁶ According to Chen Zishan’s research, the play *Love in the Fallen City*, scripted by Zhang herself, directed by Zhu Duanjun, was staged for 80 consecutive shows in 1944, reportedly all full-house. “A few anecdotes about Zhang Ailing’s *Love in the Fallen City*” (*Zhang Ailing Qingcheng zhi lian er san shi*) collected in *Sixty Years of Zhang Ailing Commentary* (*Zhang Ailing pingshuo liushi nian*).

Being a universal human need and experience, why is the matter of “love” so foregrounded in the modern period? Or, turning the question around, what makes the age-old matter of love modern?

Analyzing the relationship between private experience and the novel through Richardson’s *Pamela* (1740), Ian Watt proposed the thesis that the foregrounding of the matter of love has a lot to do with the rise of individualism, which creates unprecedented pressure on personal relationships:

the rise of individualism ... fostered not only the kind of private and egocentric mental life ..., but also the later stress on the importance of personal relationships which is so characteristic both of modern society and of the novel – such relationships may be seen as offering the individual a more conscious and selective pattern of social life to replace the more diffuse, and as it were involuntary, social cohesions which individualism had undermined (183).

Watt’s analysis has partly explained why the perennial matter of love has become such a fixation in the modern period. The picture that Watt draws here also indicates a paradox that faces modern love: the moderns’ increasing need for personal relationships is driven by utterly *personal/individualistic* needs, while relationship is *interpersonal* by definition. This makes the term “personal relationship” almost an oxymoron.

Zhang proves herself a real thinker when she decides to unfold her only full-fledged love story around the problem of individualism. At a crucial point in the narrative of *Love*, the narrator makes the following, almost philosophical, commentary, which is very rare in Zhang’s novellas: “he was just a selfish man; she was a selfish woman. In this age of chaos and disorder, there is no place for individualists, but there is always room for an ordinary couple.”⁸⁷ This commentary is made at a turning point of the story, when the main

⁸⁷Based on Kingsbury’s translation (165), with my modifications.

characters Liusu and Liuyuan start to establish a true intimacy after repeated failures to do so. The reason for their failures, the narrator implies, is their selfishness and individualism.

The above quoted line reveals that the core of *Love* is extremely sober and realistic. But what makes *Love* really unique is that, alongside a most incisive and critical examination of modern love and modern individualism(s), Zhang has also produced in *Love* a full-fledged romance. In other words, in this one novella Zhang has *joined traditions of modern novel that are supposedly antithetical: realism vs. romanticism, critical literature vs. “cheap” romance.*

The word “romance” is impossibly slippery in meaning, but basically one can pin down the following three major associations when the word is used: 1) As the descriptor of subject matter, “romance” refers to a story that centers on *a love affair*. 2) As the descriptor for narrative mode and strategy, “romance” refers to the kind of story that features improbable characters or plots and thrives on the dramatic energy brought about by an intense quest and its frustrations. 3) As the descriptor for sentiments and worldview, “romance” is often associated with the word “romantic” and the philosophical and literary movement of romanticism.

Zhang’s novella is a “romance” in all three of the above senses: it is centered on the unfolding and fulfillment of the love affair between Liusu and Liuyuan; both are charismatic individuals engaged in an intense quest for love and companionship, their quest, however, is frustrated by their inner complexities, thus lending the romance its much needed dramatic suspense; and finally, the novella is perceived by many readers as

conveying an atmosphere of melancholy, apocalyptic nostalgia and foreboding – typical features of romanticism.

Then on top of all that is added an incisive and realistic reflection on the ills of individualism and its effect on modern personal relationships.

Now the question is: what is the point? What was Zhang trying to achieve with such a polyphonic (or cacophonous, in Fu Lei's view) story? What did Zhang mean to say when she claimed adamantly, in the face of Fu Lei's attack on the novella, that this novella was meant to reflect the "totality of our era"? Was the novella's juxtaposition of realism and romance meant to illustrate that her era is both realistic and romantic? And that "modern love" is both impossibly doomed in the realist's eyes, but also hopelessly enchanted for the modern men and women who chase after it?

The two main characters, which were the focus of the Fu Lei versus Zhang Ailing debate, certainly reflect the duality of the novella as a whole: both are combinations of supposedly opposite character types. Liusu is a rare character type in the history of modern Chinese literature in that she is *both* a cunning and resolute hustler (when it comes to "business") *and* a domestic, melancholy beauty (when it comes to "sentiment"). Liuyuan is also a combination of opposites – he is both a "city rat" (to borrow a contemporary slang that is used to describe a person who is business savvy and cut out for the environment of the city in its pleasurable ways) and at the same time a decadent romantic who detests the city and the modern ways and seeks refuge in the archaic past or the primeval corners of the Earth.

The duality of the novella has a lot to do with the duality of these two characters. In the following discussions I will focus on the characters first. The fact that the

above-named, supposedly antithetical qualities could exist credibly and realistically in one person suggest the possibility that those “antitheses” and “divides” that were built for ideological conveniences might not be absolute sociologically or existentially. In the subsequent sections I will examine the opposite kinds of individualism embedded in the two characters and explore what exactly is the *connection* between those individualisms -- and for that matter, what exactly is involved in the “totality” of the modern era that Zhang has discovered and has encoded in this text. Simultaneous to this line of investigation, I will also reflect on the novella’s overall narrative modes and strategies and look into how realism and romanticism, high sentiment and “lowly” romance – these theoretically divided dimensions of modern love – are related in the real experience of the modern.

Part I. Modern love: the “low” form

Let me start with the Liusu character. The main character Liusu and her extended family embody some basic *urbanite* attitudes regarding love and marriage – attitudes that are *modern* in the urbanite manner. Like many Shanghai urbanites Liusu is “modern” in a non-ideological, real and practical manner: she has initiated the divorce from her first, abusive husband and has even succeeded in doing that; but one almost never hears her giving modern, feminist speeches on the “rights of women” or on grand concepts like “freedom” and “equality”.

Readers of the widely popular early Republican sentimental novels and the immensely popular Zhang Henshui novels⁸⁸ would find that the urbanites are “modern” in

⁸⁸ Zhang Henshui (1895-1967) was the most popular Chinese novelist during the Republican period. His success lies in his intimate understanding of the middlebrow values, his merging of the Sentimental Novel

their attitudes toward love and marriage in the sense that they do not find it necessary to tolerate an arranged marriage, especially if it imposes abuse and extreme unhappiness. Without much ideological self-awareness, they simply believe that a reasonably happy marriage is a good thing in itself.

This basic recognition of what a marriage should be about – reasonable personal happiness – serves as a rare common denominator between May Fourth New Literature and the old-style popular literature. The popular literature writers, like the New Literature writers, were almost unanimous in their dissatisfaction with the traditional institution of marriage – this is clearly shown in the highly popular Literature of Sentiment (*yanqing xiaoshuo*). It is what goes beyond this initial dissatisfaction that leads to the “great divide.” When it comes to topics like free love and women’s emancipation, popular writers could no longer come to a consensus.

Indeed, many urbanites were quite suspicious and gingerly about the “free love” advocated by the post May Fourth trends – partly out of indifference to or ignorance of the human values advocated, but even more out of fear of its social consequences. In newspapers and journals, they complained vocally about the social and marital anarchy that it would and did bring -- the participants of the “free love” usually ended up socially isolated and cut off from their families due to the rebellious move.

Facing the dilemma between arranged marriage on one hand and anarchic “free love” on the other, the urbanite middle class came up with a half-way, ingenuous solution.

(*yanqing xiaoshuo*) with the Social Novel (*shehui xiaoshuo*), and last but not least his introduction of classic poetic elements into a *shimin* story world. See Thomas Michael McClellan’s majestic study, *Zhang Henshui and Popular Chinese Fiction, 1919-1949* (2005).

It is something like *courtship*, as it is practiced among middle class families in the West, especially in England since the eighteenth century.⁸⁹

The middle class courtship as we know it from Jane Austen's novels has the following characteristics: 1) it allows a degree of choice and a room for individual autonomy, allowing young women to choose among the limited number of suitors to build a companionable union. 2) While still operating within compatible social circles, it opens the opportunity for people to marry slightly beyond their financial and social station thus creating a social mobility for those that desire it.

Thus described, one can easily see that this courtship process could be highly elastic and be channeled toward either end: on the "high" end, it could become the facilitator and stage for the unfolding of "romantic love" – finding the unique soul mate that is meant for one's unique personality; on the "low" end, it could morph into a commercial enterprise, creating a "marriage market" for people to seek financial and social gains through marital exchanges.

Zhang's novella fully exploits the elasticity of the courtship process and has built into the courtship setting the encounter between two distinct ideas of love and marriage and two kinds of urban individualism – both are "modern," but in very different senses of the word. They are embodied respectively by the two main characters Liusu and Liuyuan.

I.1 All I want is money: economic individualism and urban personality

⁸⁹ Joseph A. Boone maps out three subnarratives under the grand narrative on love and marriage: courtship, seduction, wedlock or sweet domesticity (Boone, "Foreword" to *Tradition Countertradition: Love and the Form of Fiction*). In Zhang's novella *Love* we have all these three, but each with a modern twist: illegitimate

On the side of Liusu's family, or for that matter many Shanghai urbanite families, courtship and marriage primarily serve the purpose of financial gain. By this materialism they have made love *modern*.

The families depicted by Zhang Ailing usually appear traditionally minded, and struggle to maintain the traditional standards of decency in face of the pressure of surviving modern urban living. Or, it is just the opposite -- they try to meet some real financial and economic ends through traditional means, such as financially beneficiary match-making and "courtship." In short, they are *shanghai*ren – meaning, in Zhang's definition, "traditional Chinese *plus* the pressure of modern life, the perverse product from mixing the old and the new" ("After all *shanghai*ren" 1943, emphasis mine).

While this formulation could serve as a useful framework for reading Zhang's *shanghai*ren characters, it could also impede deeper interpretations if one lets it override the reading of each literary text for its own sake. For the notion "plus" is very slippery: how exactly does one element "add" to the other? Which element – the "traditional Chinese" element or the element of "the pressure of modern life" -- will end up as the ultimately defining element?

Love in the Fallen City is a testing case for this point. Within the text, we are told that the male protagonist, raised in Britain and doing business in Shanghai and Southeast Asia, is attracted to the female protagonist for the latter's embodiment of "the old China." We are also told that the female protagonist's family, the gentry family Bai, uses an old clock and is always one hour behind the rest of the city – implying that the Bai's is a

courtship, cohabitation instead of wedlock, and finally fleeting domesticity as accomplished through the cathartic event of war.

traditional household. But any closer reading will throw these into question, for neither is Bai Liusu a “traditional” beauty, nor is the Bai’s a “traditional” household.

Love opens with the arrival of the news of a family relative’s death – the death of Liusu’s divorced husband. The male heads of the family, Liusu’s two brothers, immediately start a conversation about Liusu’s duties and rights as a widow – not according to the marriage/divorce law of the modern Chinese state by which Liusu’s divorce is already formalized, but according to the unwritten moral laws and customs of feudal society. By the rules of the latter Liusu should return to her husband’s household, performing duties in his place to his parents and siblings.

This conversation sounds very “traditional”, but right away it is revealed that the reason that they want Liusu to go back to her husband’s family and to live a life of a widow is that they want to get rid of her as a burden to their own family, after spending all of Liusu’s personal savings on failed gold and stock dealings. They even hope that she could bring some benefits to them after inheriting the fortunes of her husband. Since traditional Chinese families never assign the husband’s fortune directly to the widow, they suggest that she adopt a child born of her husband by his concubines and wait until the moment when the child grows old enough to start a separate household.

It is true that here everything still operates under the “law” of Chinese feudal society, but the motives and interests that drive each decision are purely economic. The customs and laws of the former are manipulated and utilized for the purpose of the latter, or are used to cover up the indecency of the latter. The way things work here reminds one less of traditional China per se, but the marriage market of Victorian England, where the wild

Darwinian scramble, to which one's economic motives invited him, was *balanced, checked and covered up by the orderly world of custom and decorum.*

Does Liusu share these “family” traits? The answer is yes. The case of Liusu, with the upbringing of a traditional lady (shunü), looking much more accomplished than other female family members in decency, decorum and delicacy, is even more deceiving. Notwithstanding that she is much richer in sentiments than other members of her family (the next section will address this side of her personality), there is a fundamental trait that she shares with them, which is consistently overlooked by Zhang's notable commentators except Fu Lei.⁹⁰

Suspending the kind of value judgment that Fulei makes, any responsible interpreter of the novella has to, however, look these facts in the face: Liusu's former husband has taught her how to dance the Western ballroom dance (he has obviously been exposed to Shanghai's metropolitan entertainment) but beats her badly – both are signs of a gentry family being “modernized” and in moral decay. Liusu seems to have learned the “modern” ways: she does ballroom dance superbly (put to use at her first encounter with Liuyuan); she is the first female member in her household that has taken the initiative to file for a divorce and has managed to have it; when she is financially scammed by her brothers and the sister-in-laws and personally humiliated by them, she takes pleasure in revenge – she agrees to dance with the rich match, Fan Liuyuan, arranged for her younger sister, and in effect has successfully attracted away his attention. As a result, the

⁹⁰ In his long commentary on Zhang's fiction (“On Zhang Ailing's Fiction,” 1943) Fu Lei made the following comments on the Liusu character: “the woman, all day long worrying that her last capital, the youth around the age of 30, might go bankrupt; the urgent need in material life makes her unable to care for her heart.” He is the only notable critic that connects Zhang's novella with concepts like “capital.”

matchmaker comes to invite Liusu, not her sister, to travel to Hong Kong – to meet Fan Liuyuan in private.

Like mother like daughter. Liusu's mother not only has not resisted such a proposal, but has even invested her savings to put together suitable wardrobes for Liusu's Hong Kong trip. In summary, the Bai family lives the logic of China's own pre-modern capitalism rather than feudalism: having encouraged Liusu to return to her former husband's family as a widow out of economic rather than moral considerations, they have again overridden moral considerations with financial ones in the face of Fan Liuyuan's "indecent" proposal --- this time hoping that Liusu may be remarried to the rich suitor, forgetting the widow business altogether.

In this section I will argue that one important element that makes *Love* a "modern" love story is that the character of Liusu embodies the logic of economic individualism and the qualities of urban personality such as cunning and risk-taking. The fairytale-like "success" of Liusu – not only has she remarried, but has remarried someone rich and sexy --- is for the urbanite readers a confirmation of how much these "modern" *shanghai*ren qualities can achieve for a woman in desperate financial and personal misfortunes.

Pinning down any "-ism" on a character like Liusu, or on any *shanghai*ren, maybe a contradiction to one's claim that they are non-ideological. But if one looks at individualism as *both* concept/ideology *and* as patterns of behavior, or as Raymond Williams (1961) puts it, as "both patterns learned and created in the minds and patterns communicated and made active in relationships, conventions, and institutions" (72), one should have no qualms about assigning an "-ism" to a *shanghai*ren like Liusu. Following

Williams' definition of "ideology," people who have never been conscious of the word/concept of any "-ism" could behave in manners that are very typical of it. In this section I argue that Liusu's behavior reflects a typical case, in which economic individualism and urban personality rewrite the essence of courtship and marriage.

Most of Zhang's urbanite characters, especially female ones, used the semi-modern courtship to seek a desirable husband that can bring about financial security.⁹¹ Very often the two things – "desirable husband" and "financial security" – do not belong together. When the two come into conflict, it presents a painful dilemma. Many popular love stories are actually about the very difficult choice between the desirable match and the lucrative match. Both needs are essentially egoistic – it is about one's own sensuous pleasure and/or one's own financial comfort, nothing nobler is attached to it. Fu Lei, seeing through these desires and needs as soulless, concluded that these little urban people and their so-called "love" story could not carry a tragedy – in other words, if these phenomena were ever new and modern, they only deserve the position of the lowly.

Lowly or noble, these matters were for the masses of urbanites very serious matters. Raymond Williams (1984) once made these remarks on Henry James' works: "Very serious human actions are at the center of all his [Henry James'] best work. And this means most of it. Very serious and *material* actions, as it happens" (133, emphasis mine). The same could be said of Zhang Ailing. All her major novellas feature "very serious and

⁹¹ For both its materialist bent and its female-centered perspective – it mostly serves the purpose of protecting women's interests in a society that still is limited in providing them equal financial and social equality – this model of love and marriage could be deemed as "low" as opposed to its "high" counterpart – the idealistic "romantic love."

material actions” in the sphere of love and marriage -- actions that would forever change the fate of an ordinary urbanite woman.

In *The First Brazier*, the young Weilong made the choice of marrying a desirable young man who has no financial future. She has used all her will power to resist it, but has finally followed her desire to a destructive future. Tragedy? – Might not be. But for urbanite readers it is a quite heavy subject. In comparison, Liusu’s lot is almost fairy-tale like, for her suitor Liuyuan is both desirable and wealthy. But her desired man may not have the intention to marry. So Liusu has decided that she has to accomplish both at the same time: attracting Liuyuan to the uttermost, while suppressing her desire and playing “hard to get,” until he presents “favorable terms.”

Sounds like business men at the negotiation table? Or gamblers calculating the maximum gain to be earned with their chips? Absolutely. If “serious and material actions” are at the center of Zhang’s “love” stories, these actions are performed by a new breed of women – self-reliant, rational and calculating, they are the individual assumed by classic economy.

It is very striking to find businessman and city hustler qualities in Zhang’s female characters, as they are mostly unprofessional women, or even domestic women in Liusu’s case, who are supposed to be away from the business world and protected from those things that are announced “evil” by the critics of urban capitalism. This could only mean that they have obtained their “training” purely from the domestic quarters and the small clan and communal circle they live in, or from just being *shanghai*ren, breathing the same air that the rest of the city breathes. In Zhang’s novellas there is little depiction of city life – this is unlike either the Social Novel of the traditional school, or the new city literature by

the socio-economic savvy leftists like Mao Dun. But careful readers will find *an inverted city* in these domestic quarters around perennial actions of birth, love, marriage and death.

Franco Moretti's remark on Balzac's breakthrough applies nicely to Zhang:

Balzac's extraordinary invention was to show that a young man's life could be exciting without his having to get shipwrecked on a desert island, sign a pact with the devil, or create homicidal lifesize dolls. It is sufficient to write a theatrical review, lose one's heart to a light-headed actress, and lack an iron will. . . . Indeed with Balzac, the 'prose of the world' ceases to be boring. . . . Here, indeed, everyday life can – and, in a sense, must – transform itself into adventure (115).

If Balzac has recognized the essence of city life as precarious and risky, Zhang has succeeded in infusing the same sense of risk and adventure into the city's domestic sphere. This is a tradition that she has inherited from the Social Novel (*shehui xiaoshuo*) which examines the city mostly from behind closed doors; but she has greatly "democratized" the business-savvy and action-prone crowd – expanding the spectrum from socially questionable female figures such as prostitutes and concubines to ordinary, even domestic female figures.

For Liusu the fate-turning moment and the unavoidability of adventure comes when the matchmaker, Mrs. Xu, comes to invite her, not her young and unmarried sister, to go to Hong Kong. The following is the quick thinking in Liusu's mind when that matchmaker's proposal surprises her and everyone else in the family:

Even Liusu was taken back. Mrs. Xu's volunteering to make a match for her – that had probably been an act of impulsiveness and good heart, born of a real sympathy for her situation. Running around fixing things up, arranging a dinner party, inviting that Mr. Jiang [a match proposed earlier to Liusu] – such generosity was not unheard of. But paying Liusu's fare and expenses and taking her to Hong Kong – Mrs. Xu would be shelling out a lot of money, and for what? There may be lots of virtuous people in this world, but they aren't so stupid as to throw good money away for virtue's sake. Mrs. Xu must have a backer. Could it be a plot hatched by that Fan Liuyuan? Mrs. Xu had said that her husband had close business ties with

Fan Liuyuan, and she and her husband were probably eager to help him out. Sacrificing some poor and lonely little relative to score points with him – that was a distinct possibility (Kingsbury 129).

Nothing captures the world of urbanite and their logic better than this passage. In this world, virtue and sentiment do exist, but they should never override the monetary and business considerations. In a way this is a safe and predictable world: Liusu thinks by the above-named logic, and the same unfailing logic and principle are applicable to all the others surrounding her. Her estimation of the situation is astonishingly accurate, it turns out.

If such rationality and streetwise judgments are impressive, even more impressive is Liusu's ability to perform quick calculations and make big, risky decisions on the spot. She has to respond to Mrs. Xu's indecent proposal right away, for the former has made the proposal sound like an invitation to sightseeing -- taking too long for consideration will make Liusu look unpleasantly calculating:

Liusu bowed her head, and said with a smile 'You're really too good to me.' She made a rapid calculation. There was no hope of getting that Mr. Jiang, and even if someone made another match for her, it wouldn't be much different from Jiang, maybe not even that good. Liusu's father had been a famous gambler. He'd gambled away the family's fortune and started its descent into the ranks of poor, declining households. 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, and even the role of stepmother to five children would be far above her. If she won, she'd get the prize the whole crowd was eyeing like so many greedy tigers – Fan Liuyuan – and all her stifled rancor would be swept clean away (Kingsbury 130).

After this seconds-long calculation, Liusu “agreed to Mrs. Xu's plan, which called for leaving within the week.” – in a few seconds she has made a decision that will forever change her life.

In this instance Liusu has displayed the qualities of a *risk-taker*, or a gambler, although she has never physically sat at the gambling table. These qualities are very characteristic of *modern urban personality*, for risk and speculation are the rule rather than exceptional aspects to live in a city of urban capitalism. This Shanghai world is not unlike the world depicted by the nineteenth century European novelists. The world in Thackeray's novels is, for example, one in which "the conventions of speculation at the gambling table and in the marriage market are conflated, as the social climber rises and falls and the self-willed adventurer forces his way to fame and fortune" (Wheeler 22).

The above quoted internal monologue shows that Liusu is every inch a conscious gambler on the marriage market and -- "self-willed" or not -- an adventurer. One of the highlights of the novellas is when Liusu's ship arrives at the harbor of Hong Kong:

It was a fiery afternoon, and the most striking part of the view was the parade of giant billboards along the dock, their reds, oranges, and the pinks mirrored in the lush green water. Below the surface of the water, bars and blots of clashing color plunged in murderous confusion. Liusu found herself thinking that in a city of such hyperboles, even a sprained ankle would hurt more than it did in other places. Her heart began to pound (Kingsbury 131).

The sense of risk and adventure -- involving real geographical displacement of an otherwise domestic woman, and real psychological drama -- makes this novella qualify for "romance," by which we mean the romance that has nothing to do with romanticism or the romantic aura, but a kind of story that is told in realistic mode and "organized around a hero on a frustrated quest" (Fuchs 110).

Even if one counts the first ending of the novellas as the real ending -- that Liusu becomes Liuyuan's mistress, living together with him without the sanction of marriage -- Liusu should still be considered "successful," since her primary worries are financial ones

and now she does not have to be concerned about that any more. And this “success” has a lot to do with the above discussed qualities – rational, streetwise, having the guts to gamble and, to travel.

In terms of being exemplary of the *shanghai* qualities and the successes that they can bring to a woman in need, Liusu outshines every major female character in Zhang’s novellas. Her quest and her adventure, the dramatic change in her station -- from a penniless, almost middle-aged divorcee to a financially well-off mistress of an attractive man -- are the true materials that give the novella the quality of “romance,” in the sense that it is something that happens “within the bounds of possibility but not of probability” (Fuchs 109).

The romance nature of Liusu’s story is evident if one compares hers to other female characters in Zhang’s novella. Qiqiao in *The Golden Cangue* achieves financial success through renunciation of sexual desires. Weilong from *The First Brazier* is a failure in financial terms. But Liusu’s success is not just fairy tale – she has worked for it and has won it (if not earned it) through the above discussed personal qualities. The complex mixture of romance and realism is what makes this novella attractive to a wide spectrum of readers .

Not to all readers. Liusu’s active seeking of opportunities and rational control of her lot makes her somehow a less sympathetic character to some elitist readers, making her receive far worse review than the character of Qiqiao.⁹²

⁹² Fu Lei is again a classic representative of such readers, who effusively praised *The Golden Cangue* while ruthlessly condemned *Love in the Fallen City*. Some twenty years later, C.T. Hsia again devoted all his praises to the former while hardly mentioning the latter in his “ground-breaking” appraisal of Zhang Ailing.

The reason, the Chinese scholar Qian Liqun believes, is that economic individualism was never achieved or valued under the May Fourth legacy.⁹³ According to Hu Shi, “the discovery of the individual (*geren*)” was the greatest achievement of the May Fourth movement (“Again on May Fourth” *Zai tan wusi yundong*, 1935). But what Hu Shi did not realize is that from the very beginning this “discovery” was selective -- it was determined to ignore and exclude some aspects of the *geren*.⁹⁴ As early as late Qing, Lu Xun’s manifesto essay “Thesis on Romantic Poetry” (*Moluo shili shuo*, 1907) made it abundantly clear: “Yes to individualism, no to materialism.” Almost a mockery to that adamant stand, years later, Lu Xun found himself wondering “What after Nora left home” (*nuola zouhou zenyang*, 1923) searching for answers and solutions for women’s realistic and practical independence.

Almost diametrically opposed to Lu Xun’s “yes to individualism, no to materialism,” Zhang Ailing takes a very sympathetic view toward materialism, or to be exact, toward economic individualism. The slight, not always clear, difference between materialism and economic individualism is that the latter, while placing great value on material needs and money, is not about chasing material things for their own sake, but for the sake of changing the individual’s lot and achieving security and happiness in life. In the famous self-defense essay “A Writing of One’s Own” (1944) Zhang mentioned how she was touched by the “innocent” love that Nixi, the female protagonist of her novella *Linked Loop* (*Lian huan tao*, 1944)), shows toward financial security and dignity. In *Love* Zhang made the readers share the sense of joy and celebration when Liusu presses her

⁹³Qian Liqun, “*Shilun wusi shiqi ‘rende juexing’*” *Ershi Shiji Zhongguo Wenxue Shilun*, vol. I.

⁹⁴In Hu Shi’s essay, he said he “largely agreed with the view of Zhang Xiruo” – Zhang Xiuo (Hu Shi’s contemporary and then professor at Tsianghua University), as quoted by Hu Shi, claimed that individualism’s greatest achievement is to have created a liberalism based on individual, independent political thinking. And

finger marks on the walls of the newly refurbished home that Liuyuan has bought her. In short, in her novella or her personal essays Zhang shows no condemnation toward the love of material comfort, which she pronounces as integral elements to any “good” life.

If *Love* is particularly popular with the urbanite (*shimin*) readers, it is probably because Liusu is not just another lucky woman who happens to have hit the lottery; next to luck, it is the combination of her rationality, will power and guts that have enabled her to self-help when her situation is supposed to be hopeless. This is the legacy that Zhang took from urban popular literature, which almost always featured money-wise and street-wise female figures with great sense of agency in changing their own fate. *In this area that shimin literature and culture have a major dimension to add to the matrix of modernity.*

While Liusu’s limited “success” epitomizes the best that urbanite women could offer, the limited nature of her success also indicates the fatal deficiency of the urbanite women. Zhang touches a disturbing note when the word concubine (*yi taitai*) surfaces in regard to Liusu’s situation by the novella’s first ending – countless female characters with Liusu’s caliber end up in this category. One reason that the kind of individualistic autonomy that these women exhibited is often overlooked by studies of modern discourses on individualism is that the autonomy of these women is not sought in modern education and professions, but sought instead in the areas of relationships and marriage. This kind of “autonomy” contradicts the mainstream feminist discourse and for that reason it has been and will continue to be considered the low modern.

he claimed that it had also created a lot of problems, “especially in the economic area.” This is very similar to Lu Xun’s view earlier, a view that Hu Shi did not seem to object to at all.

What is tragic is that, In Liusu's case, the disdain comes from the very person whose love and respect she wants to win. Seeing through her materialism, Liuyuan points out sarcastically that for her "marriage is no different from long-term prostitution." So Fu Lei was wrong: there are elements of tragedy in this novella – Liusu's situation is tragic, in the sense that because of the social situation that urbanite women like her are subject to, they are deprived of chances of formal education and professional opportunity and are doomed to suffer condemnation from modern men like Liuyuan.

I.2. All I need is love: homelessness and the narcissistic self

Notice that I have just said Liusu is trying to gain "love and respect" from Liuyuan. But didn't I say earlier that Liusu was after his money? Having associated Liusu with the money-wise and street-wise heroines of urban popular literature, especially the genre called Social Novel, I need to point out immediately that Liusu's character also shows another aspect not to be found in that genre, which makes her a much more complex literary creation. The complexity partly comes from the profound contradiction in Liusu's character: she is unwaveringly rational and calculating on one hand, and delicately sentimental and melancholic on the other.

If Zhang Ailing paints Liusu as a one-dimensional character like Nixi, the novella will end up just a narrative of quest for money and dignity. But *Love in a Fallen City* is more complex in both characterization and narrative. *The novella has both an external narrative of quest and adventure, as well as an internal narrative of longing and loss.*

By the time of the first ending of the novella, Liusu has found the object of her external quest. But she is still amiss of her internal quest: home and intimacy. After a week of being together in their new house, Liuyuan tells Liusu that he needs to travel to England for business. Liusu asks to go with him, but Liuyuan says it is impossible. He suggests that she rents a house in Hong Kong and waits “just a year or so” until he comes back. Here are Liusu’s thoughts, alone at night in the empty house:

... how would she while away all this time? Play mah-jongg with Mrs. Xu, watch operas? Start flirting with actors, smoke opium, go the routine of the concubine? ...It was not going to come to that! She was not that kind of person, she could control herself. But...could she keep from going mad? Six rooms, three up and three down, all ablaze with light. The newly waxed floor as bright as snow. And no sign of anyone. One room after another, echoing emptiness.

It is obvious that Liusu desires more than just sex and money -- otherwise she would not be horrified by the idea of “flirting with actors,” a “self help” that a person like Nixi will be ready to use in face of sexual deprivation. What Liusu misses in this brand new house is true companionship and home -- an idea of home that means more than just a house but warmth, companionship and intimacy.

This raises two sets of questions: first, as much as she and Liuyuan both desire such intimacy, why have they not achieved it? – Liuyuan obviously feels no palms about leaving her for “a year or so.” Second, the idea of such a “home,” being a very normal and clichéd idea for all of us moderns with our ideals of romantic love and domestic bliss, stands out as a bit curious and strange when it is juxtaposed to a character like Liusu: *how could such a “hard” person – streetwise, with gambler’s guts – entertain such “soft” ideas of home?*⁹⁵

The second question first: such an idea of “home” seems so “natural” that it would not have caught our attention, were it not so contradictory and mismatched to the rest of

Liusu's personality. After all, countless pieces of modern Chinese literature perpetrated such an idea and expectation, most notable of them being Bing Xin's very popular eulogies of domestic bliss and motherhood.⁹⁶ Being remote from cruel and heartless reality seemed to be the very attraction of such writings. So in a sense modern Chinese society shows the same contradiction that we find in Liusu: a very "hard" society that harbors very "soft" ideas of self and personal relationships.

For sociologist Richard Sennett, the kind of contradiction we find in Liusu is typical – it reflects what he sees as the central contradiction of modern capitalist society. According to Sennett's famous study of social psychology, modern capitalist society is composed of two contradictory orders: while the market operates by the logic of impersonality and indifference, the social imagination of the same society operates by what Sennett calls the "ideology of intimacy." This ideology fosters a "refugee mentality." Sennett explains it this way: "...aggression may be a necessity in human affairs, but we have come to think it an abhorrent personal trait. But what kind of personality develops through experiences of intimacy? Such a personality will be molded in the expectation, if not the experience, of trust, of warmth, of comfort."⁹⁷ Sennett sees this as a problem and asks the question "Is it humane to form soft selves in a hard world?" (Sennett 260)

Liusu seems to operate by the contradiction pointed out by Sennett: while those around her and she herself operate by the logic of cold rationality, she deep down abhors those traits, and detests it when she sees those traits in Liuyuan. She has formed the so to

⁹⁵The phrase "hard" versus "soft" is borrowed from Richard Sennett *The Fall of Public Man*, p260.

⁹⁶Bing Xin's poems and short stories mostly described happy childhood and warm family life with the presence of gentle, reticent, domestic women. The most famous is the collection of short stories titled *Paternal Aunt* (*gugu*, 1932). The anguish and frustrations of her contemporaries did not seem to disturb her world of simplicity, peace and bliss.

speak “refugee mentality,” *seeking an escape from the world of the street in personal relationships*, feeling lost and unsatisfied if home and relationship are not about “trust, warmth, ...[and] comfort.” Aggression is something that she needs to *do*, even *be*, in the sex, money and marriage market, but it is not something that she wants to be or see in personal relationships. How contradictory. And how could anyone be both people at the same time?

If Liusu’s businessman mentality is picked up from the everyday life of Shanghai, where does the other side of her personality come from? Are sentiment and melancholy also part of the everyday life of the city?

It is hard to imagine that some basic human desires like intimacy could be things that are programmed, or something ideological. But this is exactly what happened in modern history. In a recent book on the discourse of love in modern Chinese literature and culture, Lee Haiyan draws our attention to how “soft” matters such as sentiment and sensibility were systematically utilized to “serious” ends such as building the concept and the reality of the modern nation. At one point she even pronounces that “the modern subject is first and foremost a sentimental subject, and that the modern nation is first and foremost a community of sympathy” (Lee 7).

While Lee’s inquiry appears to be heading in the same direction as Sennett’s, I find Lee’s approach too narrowly focused on the Enlightenment paradigm. Looking across both sides of the great divide, both urban popular literature *and* May Fourth literature, urban

⁹⁷ Nothing captures this phenomenon better than the popularity of authors like Bing Xin, celebrating childhood, motherhood and domestic bliss, when the reality was warlords, comprador and large population of refugees.

modernity *and* cultural modernity, I find Sennett's socio-psychological account closer to seeing the whole picture – the sociological as well as the cultural picture.

Sociologically speaking, sentimental longings and soft selves as we have found in Liusu are part of a large reaction to the reality of modern capitalist society. The cult of sentiment and the ideology of domesticity and intimacy originated in the city dwellers' longing for oasis of warmth and humanness, an escape in the desert of impersonality and indifference that characterizes the modern city. But once reified and exalted as something intrinsically “good” and “must have” by the cultural and ideological apparatus, this longing could translate into something pathological: it could cause a profound melancholy, or what I call the feeling of perpetual homelessness, because, while one posits an ideal of “home,” one will find reality even more unbearable. Even in the best kind of homes, things are at least partly like the street out there, for interpersonal relationship, no matter how intimate, is after all a social matter.

Longing for the fabricated ideal of “pure/personal” home while being a ruthless street-wise business woman, the duality of the modern personality cannot be more obvious as in a character like Liusu.

Brilliantly, Zhang has created both the male and female characters of *Love* as complete and whole modern creatures, that is, a two-sided coin as described by Sennett: both Liuyuan and Liusu are very selfish, calculating and streetwise, while both secretly hold a desire for the opposite; both are rational and ruthless while melancholic and sentimental at the same time. The frustrations to their “love” mainly come from these profound contradictions that are typically modern.

In the history of modern Chinese literature, one probably cannot find a second love story that is staged between such full-fledged “modern” creatures. The most successful genres of the urban popular literature – Social Novel (*shehui xiaoshuo*) and Sentimental Novel (*yanqing xiaoshuo*) – represent urban people’s interests by featuring respectively two (opposite) kinds of women: one is the hustler, social climber or fortune maker -- female versions of these are the likes such as prostitutes, opera singers and mistresses -- on the street; the other is the melancholic beauty, young and forlorn widow, lonely wives, love-lorn young ladies -- at home.

Zhang Henshui’s *Love through Tears and Laughter* (1929) is the first major hit that has crossed the above stereotyping and is considered a representative work of a new genre: Social Sentimental Novel (*shehui yanqing xiaoshuo*). In that novel, Fan Jiashui the idealistic and romantic student lover is attracted to the streetwise songstress Sheng Fengxi. Once in love, he attempts to transform her into a student and a homey, sentiment-rich lover. In other words, the ideals of sentiment are imposed on someone who is street-smart and practical. The result is one of the most tragic and disturbing love stories in the history of urban popular literature in China.

Taking the setting from Beijing to Shanghai, Zhang’s *Love* features the two themes again: the practical woman versus the sentimental woman. Zhang’s attitude is not a melodramatic one: she is not creating a piece of fiction in which readers are made to feel “how nice would it be if she were otherwise.” Instead, she lets the character be two-sided from the very beginning, meaning they seem to be so ideal and “complete” modern creatures. Moreover, unlike Zhang Henshui’s novel, Zhang’s novella did not insert a third party to create a triangle situation. Then the failure (if not tragedy) of the relationship

between these two characters is much more puzzling. One cannot easily pin it down to a third party, or either side of the practicality–versus-sentiment opposition, which leaves the reader to ponder the cause(s).

If individualism, as the narrator of *Love* suggests, is what stops them from developing true intimacy, one has to understand the matter on two levels, in both senses of the word “individual”: that is, as *persons* who are understood to be socially differentiated from all others and not to be defined by membership in a social unit; and as *selves* with a distinctive inner life or psychology (Shumway, 18).⁹⁸

In the last section I identified Liusu’s practical self-interest (as a *person*) as an element that inhibits her from developing love and true intimacy -- in Liuyuan’s words she simply treats marriage as “long term prostitution,” a way to exchange sex for financial gains. In this section I will look at elements in her inner life or psychology (as a *self*) that interfere with her pursuit of love and intimacy.

Being emotionally literate and capable of great sentimentality does not necessarily facilitate love and intimate relationships. Any casual review of modern literature on love

⁹⁸ In popular literature until the late 1920s, *shimin* literature usually features “individuals” in the first sense of the word, emphasizing the conflict between their self-interest and the interest of others in economic or social matters. Many of the Republican social novels feature stories of erotic adventure and fortuitous marriages beside stories of economic fortune-making – in which little spiritual or emotional exchanges are involved, and thus little representation of the “inner life or psychology” of those involved is presented.

It is only in the gentry women featured in the Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies love stories, and later in the bourgeois women featured in the love and marriage stories by the New Literature writers from Lu Yin and Bai Wei in the 1920s, to Ding Ling and Chen Ying in the 1930s that one encounters more interiority and more complex personalities among the domestic women depicted. But these women are often devoid of social or economic motivations or aspirations.

It is a notable new tendency of the 1940s, to be found in the so-called New Popular Literature (*xin tongsu wenxue*), that lower middle class or middle class *shimin* characters, especially female ones, start to take on distinctive inner life or complex psychology previously only assigned to gentry and bourgeois women⁹⁸. This, combined with *shimin* literature’s established ethos of economic individualism, produces middle-class *shimin* characters like Liusu, who are modern “individuals” in both of the above quoted senses of the word.

will reveal that love-hunger and melancholy generated by the ideology of intimacy is a two-edged sword -- it generates amorous hook-ups as much as it causes relational barriers. Much hunger for love is generated through a *sense/feeling* of being unhappy. Associated with it are often other psychological complexes, some of them are detrimental to interpersonal relationships. One such psychological complex is narcissism.

More moderns feel unhappy not just because modern reality is more horrible to live in, but because modern people are more likely to feel entitled to happiness. As Sennett points out, “the notion that human beings have a right to be happy is a peculiarly modern, Western idea” (90). Not only has “happiness” become one of the rights for the moderns to aspire to, this right has also become freed from the family’s care and taken into the hands of each individual. This proves to be precarious among the youth. The burden of caring for one’s interests and needs creates an enormous burden and takes away the lightheartedness and innocence that should belong to a young man or woman. If in traditional society the patriarchal control could be repressive, in the new social order the absence or weakening of patriarchal control or benevolent protection causes its own problem – people start to become more preoccupied with one’s self, one’s happiness and wellbeing. In Sennett’s view, it unleashes the narcissistic energies in society and systemizes self-absorption to destructive effects.

In a sense the modern period in China witnessed a democratization of the right to happiness. Sentimentalism and the feeling of entitlement to personal happiness were first the luxurious longings of the gentry literati or the literary youth, then it became a commonly felt sentiment among mildly educated youth and members of the petty bourgeoisie. By the time of the 1940s that sentiment was commonly expressed in writings

about the petty urbanites (New Popular Literature) and even in writings about peasants (the July School).

It is possible that much feeling of unhappiness is not so much about the nature of the existence itself, but because of the stark *incongruence between one's desire, between the happiness one feels that one is entitled to, and the reality one finds himself in*. Such a feeling of unhappiness, if combined with the limit of personal freedom and lack of social and financial resources, which is definitely the case for domestic urbanite women like Liusu, could generate a profound sense of powerlessness.

Almost all of Zhang's female characters are what I call "disowned" women who carry the burden of being the only care-taker of one's future and yet having few resources at their disposal to truly change it. Zhang's female protagonists are either orphaned like Nixi and Qiqiao, or the protection of the parents is so weak that it virtually doesn't count, as is the case with Liusu and Weilong. If there is any remnant of a family with siblings and in-laws, it is one in which the patriarchal authority and security are forever lost, and their useless descendants live in a cold, heartless world of the *shimin* mentality, each for oneself. *Having lost the traditional, repressive yet also protective patriarchal shelter, but at the same time denied access to the educational benefits and social connections that modern, educated women could rely on,*⁹⁹ Zhang's *shimin* women live in a powerless and needy situation that is profoundly humiliating – it is especially so when their desire and feeling of entitlement for happiness is fanned by the popular readings on romantic love and domestic bliss.

⁹⁹ Richard Sennett in his *Fall of the Public Man* contributes the rise of what he calls "narcissist character disorders" to the demise of public life. This is illuminating for understanding Zhang's Shanghai *shimin* characters – many of them have lost a sense of belonging to the traditional extended family or clan life, yet

For those who have a “soft self,” such as in the case of Weilong and Liusu, the vulnerability and powerlessness, combined with rich sentiments and unrealistic longings for protection, warmth and love, creates a melancholy that is, although painful to live, beautiful to watch for men with patriarchal egos. These men do not realize that such melancholy beauty has a thorn – it might be the sign of a narcissist personality.

One psychic defense developed out of the feeling of unhappiness and powerlessness, is self-pity, self-love, or narcissism. Many of Zhang’s female characters such as Liusu, Qiqiao, Chuanchang in *Withered Flower* (*hua diao*, 1944), Yingzhu in *Genesis* (*chuang shi ji*, 1945) and some male characters like Nie Chuanqing in *Jasmine Tea* (*mo li hua pian*, 1943), are narcissists. This personality, as Christopher Lasch’s classic work puts it, “take[s] root in the feeling of homelessness and displacement that afflict so many men and women today, ... and in the contradiction between the promise that they can ‘have it all’ and the reality of their limitations” (237).

The word narcissism/narcissistic could mean many things depending on who is using it. In the most basic sense of the word, narcissism equals what Lacan calls the “mirror stage” – it is a necessary means and stage for individuals to form a sense of self and individuality. The object of Lasch’s study is the pathological kind of narcissism. It refers to an exaggerated self-absorption generated by the increased need for an illusory feeling of self-sufficiency -- as a defense against the feeling of powerlessness, worthlessness and social alienation as described above.

A private scene in *Love* captures such a psychological response quite sharply. This is a scene where Liusu is alone with herself, after realizing that there is no one in the whole

have not established any entry into the cosmopolitan, public life of the bourgeoisie made of schools, clubs, political associations or workplace unions.

family and for that matter in the whole world that she can rely on to look out for her interest:

. . . The Bai household is a bit like an otherworldly cave: . . . here youth is not of much worth. They have all the youth on Earth – one after another child is born, new bright eyes, new fresh red lips, new intelligence. Yet, year after year, eyes become dim, brains become dumb, another generation is then to be born . . .

Liusu suddenly utters a shriek, covers her eyes and stumbles upstairs. . . . Once upstairs, in her own room, she turns on the light and throws herself on to the dressing mirror to look at herself. . . (Kingsbury 121).

The self she sees is quite reassuring – the text describes the image in the mirror as young and quite beautiful in her own way. Here Liusu’s sense of purpose of her life and her self-worth are developed in solely narcissistic manner – that is, through self-love and a hyperawareness of one’s “qualities,” in short, an appreciation of oneself from an admirer’s point of view. A sense of self-sufficiency is created through such a self-absorption. The narcissist compensates for the absent parental love or love from the opposite sex by serving as his or her own care-giver, lover and admirer.

Careful readers of the story will realize that Liuyuan has made the hurtful comment “basically you consider marriage a long-term prostitution” not because he does not find Liusu virtuous enough – the “playboy” Liuyuan is not looking for a “virtuous” woman in the first place. He says that rather because, while wanting him for financial and sensuous fulfillment, Liusu is not really able to fall in love with him or genuinely care for him -- not even in exchange for the things she wants.

A typical narcissist is, in a pathological sense of the word, unable to love anybody but him or herself. At a crucial moment of the narrative, the first time Liuyuan and Liusu have a heart-to-heart conversation, Liuyuan pleads to Liusu, “I don’t even understand myself – but I want you to understand me!” While answering “I understand, I understand”

to Liuyuan's plea, Liusu undergoes the following inner reaction: "... while comforting him, she couldn't help however thinking of her own face in the moonlight, the delicate and fragile contours, eyebrows and eyes, beautiful beyond reason; misty, ethereal. Slowly she bowed her head."

Here Liusu's self-absorption, at a moment when her attention should be turned to the other person's needs, is almost pathological. As Thomas Johansson points out, the pathological narcissist is an individual who "does not want anything to upset their introverted narcissism" (104). Not surprisingly, when Liuyuan sees Liusu's change of posture and the slipping of her attention back to herself, he immediately switches to a different, less intimate, tone in speaking. Although the reader does not have access to the male protagonist's thoughts, one can guess that at that moment he probably realizes that she is again immersed in her own self and has not at all opened up to care about him, despite hearing his very personal story and heart-felt plea. After that incident, Liuyuan turns back again to the flirtatious rather than heart-felt conversations.

The narcissistic personality, as embodied by Liusu and some other of Zhang's characters, has only a shadowy understanding of the needs of others. As a result, Lasch concludes, "... intimacy becomes unobtainable as a consequence of the very circumstances which lead individuals to be concerned to achieve it. The inability to take a serious interest in anything other than shoring up the self makes the pursuit of intimacy a futile endeavor."

It is in association with the above-named phenomena that Charles Taylor calls individualism one of the "malaises of modernity." Taylor proclaims that "the dark side of individualism is a centering on the self"(4). Indeed, the beginning of modern literature in China, in both the popular and the elite camp, was marked by writers' overwhelming

propensity to adopt confessional modes of writing such as diary and letter. From the moment that individualism took the center stage in history, the “dark side” of it – the specter of self-centering already loomed large. The intensity of it was to such an extent that any discussion of *modern love* has to include that of “self love” and how it frustrates “love” and interpersonal relationships.

Part II. Modern Love – the “Higher” Form?

The above discussion should suffice to make the point that underneath this seemingly trendy and trivial romance is an incisive account of modern social psychology. And the same social and psychological incisiveness is also seen in Zhang’s portrayal of Liuyuan, the second major character of the novella.

If the Liusu character sums up female types in the social novel (*shehui xiaoshuo*) and the sentimental novel, by which I mean both the popular Sentiment Novel (*yanqiang xiaoshuo*) and the post-May Fourth female writings, the Liuyuan character seems to walk right out of a *haipai* story. His persona has two sides: the “city rat” that is cut out for the city, and the decadent romantic that hates the modern city and seeks refuge in anti-modern and anti-urban objects and settings. Liuyuan’s dubiousness toward the city reminds the readers of the *haipai* decadents or decadent romantics, either as fictional characters in *haipai* literature or as *haipai* writers’ real-life personas – both share a dubious relationship to the modern city.

In terms of literary culture, *haipai* decadence occupies a very peculiar place. It is somewhere in the middle between the great divide, with May Fourth Enlightenment and

romanticist literature on one side, and popular urban literature on the other. Because it is modern literature, nourished by the modern metropolitan life and influenced by Western literary trends, *haipai* literature is never associated with the traditional popular literature in *style*. But neither can it be comfortably identified with May Fourth “New Literature” (*xin wenxue*), for in *content* May Fourth literature is informed by the spirit of Enlightenment and romanticism, both are critical of the very city life that *haipai* characters and writers cannot live without.

The closest link between *haipai* writing and New Literature is the connection between decadence and romanticism – the latter being a major cultural and literary stream in the post-May Fourth period. The difference between these two is very hard to pin down and will be the focal point in the following discussions.

Analyzing the Liuyuan character offers a good opportunity to look into the *haipai* structure of feeling -- especially the literary, cultural and social psychological phenomenon called *decadence*, which is part and parcel of the urban and lived modernity, and, for curious reasons, is especially obsessed with the matter of love.

II. 1 Love is my private faith: decadent individualism and the metropolitan man

As a life attitude, decadence is “as old as man himself” (Calinescu 151). It basically refers to a life attitude that predicated on the corruptive, sinful and destructive aspects of human nature. Liuyuan, for example, upon his first encounter with Liusu and with the readers, reveals himself as a decadent in this sense: “... When I arrived in China I was already twenty four. ...I couldn’t bear the shock, and I started slipping downward. . . . I like

to have a good time – and I have plenty of money, plenty of time – do I need any other reason?” So negativity combined with dissipation equals decadence.

Understanding decadence as a universal human phenomenon would not help, however, in explaining the proliferation and foregrounding of such personalities and attitude in *modern* urban literature. In other words, one has to answer the question: *what is it exactly about decadence that lends so well to the expression of modernity?* Or vice versa.

Calinescu’s classic observation on the relationship between decadence and modernity can serve as a starting point. As Calinescu points out, modernity is profoundly informed by the idea of history and progress – the latter being an idea that is *relativistic* in nature (so is the very concept of “modern”).¹⁰⁰ The same relativistic principle, Calinescu believes, also informs decadence -- the other dominant phenomenon in modern culture. What drives modern decadence is a stubborn refusal to be complicit with the orthodox: the discourse of “decadent versus orthodox” works as the conceptual counterpart of the “modern-versus-traditional” discourse. The difference is only the latter connotes a temporal narrative while the former does not make such a claim. Thus one often sees the phenomenon that the decadents sometimes show their “vanguard” gesture by “regressing” to a bygone age and culture.

On the higher end, decadence could have its telos. Romanticism, the origin of the modern decadence, upholds for example passion and sexuality against the conventional morality of the philistine. In the context of modern Chinese literature, early members of the

¹⁰⁰ This brilliantly explains the puzzling phenomenon during the post May Fourth period, during which all matters of “good-versus-bad” could so easily be translated into “progressive-versus-reactionary” matters and acquire a new, quasi teleological significance.

Creation Society practiced a *critical decadence* that upholds individualism and originality against traditionalism.¹⁰¹

On the lower end, decadence could have no telos behind it; it prescribes nothing and is only a gesture of pure negativity. The quintessential *haipai* literature seems to be more about this kind of decadence. Just as *xiandai* (modern) “degenerates” into the *muodeng* (modish) in Shanghai’s urban culture, *haipai* decadent writers practice a decadence devoid of systematic program or articulated value. The “New Hooliganism” (*xin liumang zhuyi*) as formulated by *haipai* representatives Pan Hannian and Ye Lingfeng is quite telling of the *haipai* brand of decadence: “New Hooliganism has no slogan, no creed, most important is to rebel against whatever oneself is unsatisfied with.”¹⁰²

Liuyuan seems to be a decadent defined by such a simple rebellious impulse. Indeed, the first connection he made with Liusu is the common terror that they feel toward people surrounding them. The difference is only that Liuyuan decides to act upon it – not to change these people or the institutions behind them (that will make him a true rebel or revolutionary), but to act destructively toward himself, to just makes him “different” from the people he detests.

¹⁰¹According to Shih Shumei, romanticism in the Chinese context shows both commonality and difference compared to romanticism in the Western context. In the Western context, according to Calinescu (1987), romanticism involves a critique of the “bourgeois modernity” which overemphasized technology and rationality and resulted in stultifying middle-class conventions and commercialism (41-42). In the Chinese context, “in keeping with May Fourth anti-traditionalism, the object of their critique was not modernity in its various forms but that which obstructed modernity: traditional morality and the backwardness of the nation” (Shi, p112)/ Writers like Zhou Quanping and Yu Dafu were, in Shi’s words, “socially engaged critics who protested against the conventional ‘morality’ of society which allowed injustice, inhumanity and other perversions to exist. Shi also points out that even when writers like Guo Moruo and Yu Dafu are upholding the same values as held by romanticism, the Chinese context still makes their cause slightly different, for example in Chinese romanticism “...the sexual or the libidinal never exists in separation from the national” (115).

¹⁰²Ya Ling (Pan Hannian), “New Hooliganism” (*xin liumang zhuyi*) debut issue of *Huanzhou*. Pan Hannian, Ye Lingfeng and Mu Shiyong to be discussed later in this section are all part of the *haipai* – Western influenced, urban decadent – literature in Shanghai. Under this umbrella term there are subtle differences:

Indeed, the biggest difference between *haipai* decadents and the May Fourth decadents is the former's lack of social or cultural commitment or impact.¹⁰³ Tracing back to the above quoted statement, the crucial line is “rebel against whatever *oneself* is unsatisfied with” (my italics). The randomness with which they locate the object for rebellion supports a thesis that draws the connection between decadence and *anarchic individualism*.

Paul Bourget, an author quoted by Calinescu, argues that there are “organic societies” in which “the energies of the components are subordinated to the goals and demands of the total organism” and *societies in decadence*, which are characterized by “a growing degree of ‘anarchy’” and by “a gradual loosening of the hierarchical relationships among the various elements of the social structure.” For Bourget, decadent societies are highly individualistic. Calinescu, following Bourget, believes that the concept of individualism is central to any definition of decadence (170).

Understood this way, decadence becomes an essentially *sociological* rather than ideological issue. In such an understanding of the phenomenon, it really doesn't matter where exactly each decadent is heading toward: With Pan Hanyan, it is revolution, with Ye Lingfeng it is art, with Mu Shiyong it is an attitude. With a great mass of modern men and women in the metropolis, it could even manifest in the idea of “style” – flaunting anarchic individualism through material signs such as attire and mannerism. With Liuyuan

Pan Hannian more of a bohemian or revolutionary vanguard, Ye Lingfeng more of a dandy, Mu Shiyong a quintessential metropolitan man who declares that he cannot live without cigar, cocktail and jazz.

¹⁰³ Zhang Kebiao's memoir in the 1990s provides a quite pithy summary of the decadence phenomenon from an insider's point of view: “the small coterie that we formed around Teng Gu was not really a group, just a motley crowd, . . . Discontent with the society, but lacking the courage for frontal confrontation, we showed our discontent with the method of escape [from reality] and self-intoxication. This tendency, combined with China's own tradition of the gallant young talent, becomes our school of thought [new hooliganism]. . . . In short, it is about rebelling against the contemporary society and trying the best to oppose the prevalent mindset.. “*Tenggu yu shihou she*” *Wenyuan Caoben*, Shanghai Shudian, 1996 (12-13), my translation.

decadence manifests in all sorts of things: dissipation and womanizing; desire to escape to nature, especially primeval forest; desire to escape to the remote past, fascinated with the time and world captured by the classic Book of Poetry.

Looked at this way, *haipai* kind of urban decadence is part and parcel of the social anarchy and anarchic individualism that characterize a modern urban society – if it ever appears “anti-modern” it is because decadence by definition means to oppose the orthodox and the mainstream.

It is beyond the scope and the concern of this thesis to fully explore the complex relationship between decadence and modernity. One thing that can be safely said is that the *haipai* decadents, be they critical of modern civilization or modern urbanism, are also very much products of the same.

It is very ironic but also symbolic that Liuyuan’s conversation with Liusu about the Malay forest and their elopement to it is conducted over tea leaflets provided in one of the most famous restaurants in Hong Kong. It is also very telling that this decadent who believes in nature and primitivism conducts his entire courtship in the luxury hotel with a sandbeach outside, and in the entertaining and consuming outlets that Hong Kong has to offer. We are told that “every day he took her out, and they did everything there was to do . . . movies, Cantonese opera, casinos, the Gloucester Hotel, the Cicil Hotel, the Bluebird Coffee Bar, Indian silk and satin store, Szechuan cuisine in Kowloon” With a slight Hong Kong twist, this list sounds familiar to anyone who knows the way of life of the decadents in the metropolis of Shanghai.

Indeed, for all their talk of primitivism and exoticism the decadents do not need to go beyond the city – all the mini escapes offered by the decadent outlets of the city suffice for that purpose. Ultimately speaking, these decadent outlets are *not* a negation of the city, but rather the inside of the same coat.

Liuyuan's taste and sensibilities seem to be a vulgarized Mu Shiying, the latter featuring such a line in his short story "Cemetery": "I smell the Mediterranean vineyard in her smile"¹⁰⁴. In another piece of writing, the author-narrator sees the following in a night club beauty: "scrutinizing her – this is a hobby of mine, for the human face is like a map: ... At the northern border is the black forest belt [eyebrows, my note], ...beneath that a verdant high ridge [nose, my note], east and west to that ridge are two long and narrow streaks of grassland [eyes, my note]. Legends say that here used to be the ancient habitats of the witches ..."¹⁰⁵.

If this is equally affected and laughable as Liuyuan's reading tropical forests out of tea leaves, it is, culturally speaking, very revealing. The decadent doesn't need to and doesn't really intend to go out of the metropolis for their anti-urban or anti-modern gestures, for *the metropolis is different from a mere city exactly in that it has become a universe that contains everything: it is nature and civilization, elegance and primitivism, city and jungle, all in one. In other words, it is a place that is able to contain its own negation and antithesis. Here nature is aestheticized, artificiality is naturalized, and thought is erotized. Here no contradiction or rebellion is too great to have to escape the city's boundaries.*

¹⁰⁴Yan, 1985, 129, my translation.

¹⁰⁵Yan, 1985, 146, my translation

This explains why, with all his talks about tropical forests and the catastrophe of the modern civilization, Liuyuan still comes across as a very urban or metropolitan man. Fu Lei abhors what Fan Liuyuan embodies: “full of cynical games of a hedonist; although so adroit, urbane and witty, nevertheless the product of a society that has reached morbid refinement.”¹⁰⁶ But Fulei is only half-right – Liuyuan is not just a metropolitan man and a hedonist, he is *at the same time* a decadent individualist and an anarchic rebel. These two aspects are *one* in *haipai* decadence as it is embodied by many of the *haipai* writers and the metropolitan men and women in the city.

Obviously, Zhang Ailing has well understood this important urban personality type – *the decadent metropolitan man*. Or one can say that she has grasped the innate connection between decadence and urban modernity. But what has love got to do with all this?

While the *haipai* decadents do not have well formulated creeds or core values, one does notice that love – spanning the whole spectrum between the romantic and the erotic – seems to be a constant theme in their writings. The Chinese scholar Xu Daoming offers a good observation on this phenomenon in his study on *haipai* literature. He believes that *haipai* writers’ amorous writing is an indication of their narrow and weak social commitment: “They had neither the ability nor the courage to change society. To them, the only matter that they can truly claim some control over is the most private matter, that is, erotic/amorous relationship” (Xu 183). In other words, their individualism and nonconformity mostly manifest in the area of *private life* – especially in the most private matter that is love and sexuality.

¹⁰⁶Zhang Ailing, Vol. IV, Appendices, p411, my translation.

Liuyuan's behavior toward love is utterly informed by the logic of decadence. First, one has to remember how unconventional and thus decadent his choice of love object is: 1) she is a divorced woman near her 30s – this is against all conventions, traditional ones or modern ones; 2) she is a melancholic lady from an urbanite gentry household – this is against Liuyuan's own social and cultural station, as a British educated businessman. Zhang the novelist really knows how to exploit the fictional possibilities from her characters – from whom else but a decadent can one expect a really unconventional and surprising love interest, one that will create a modern “fairy tale” for unlikely women?

However, one has to note that, in Liuyuan's case, none of this is meant to serve social purposes, but purely out of a *personal* and *private* need to redeem oneself from detesting one's life and to find a reason for being. In other words, the kind of love object one chooses becomes a way to articulate and perform one's own self and subjectivity – in Liuyuan's case with a decadent twist, as a negative need to dispel sense of emptiness and meaninglessness in life. So contrary to Fu Lei's perception, to both Liusu and Liuyuan this romance is a very heavy matter: for Liusu it is about changing her desperate fate, for Liuyuan it is about, well, being.

Being what? To pin down a decadent's faith is just as difficult as pinning down what exactly is he rebelling against. In Liuyuan's case it seems to be just an overall world-weariness: weary of the people surrounding him, of the modern world he lives in, weary even of himself. So he explains that one of the things about Liusu that attracts him is that she “is like someone *not of this world*” (my italics), having “all these little gestures, and a romantic aura, very much like a Peking opera singer.”

If Liuyuan is looking for qualities in the love object something that matches his vague private aspirations, one can say his behavior in love roughly falls within the orbit of “romantic love.” Lawrence Stone famously interprets romantic love as a manifestation of “affective individualism,” in which the individual articulates who he *is* and his relation to society through “affective” behaviors (Stone, 1980 150). And Stone inclines toward the socio-cultural rather than biological and psychological view of “romantic love”: unlike sex and sexuality, romantic love, Stone argues, is first of all a culture-induced, sublimated response of the leisured class to preconceived ideas of beauty and sublimity etc. (Stone 1987). This partly explains why Liusu the worldly woman feels nothing about “romantic love” whereas Liuyuan, more leisured and “cultured,” can entertain that idea.

Michael Bell in his *Sentimentalism, Ethics and the Culture of Feeling* proposes a reading of “romantic love” that is more ethical and spiritual: Bell argues that “romantic love” presupposes a *full-fledged individual* who knows what one believes in and who one is (spiritually and ethically), and the love bond is based on the recognition that another individual is one’s “match” in the essence, or the commonly called “soul mate.”

While linking Liuyuan’s love behavior to that of “romantic love,” I have to point out that in Liuyuan’s case there is again a decadent twist. What Liuyuan recognizes in his love object (Liusu) is less the spiritual or emotional qualities; rather the recognition is more about less tangible qualities such as the aesthetic appeal, a certain aura and air that the person carries, which *suggests* some inner essence, of which there is no confirmation or no need of confirmation.

It is beyond the scope of this study to articulate the connection between aestheticism and decadence. For my context it suffices to say that the emphasis on aesthetic

and sensuous appeals is probably one of the most important differences that separate decadent romantic love from the May Fourth romantic love. Why it is so is a question too large for the current context. But one thing is certain: the aesthetic and sensuous recognition takes *much less time and real intimacy* to establish than a spiritual and emotional recognition. In other words, it is more suitable for the fast-paced life of a modern city and a more transient social life. To metropolitan men and women exposed to ever greater sensuous stimuli, “love” becomes an ever more fleeting and ephemeral, albeit ever more enthralling, experience. *Haipai* literature of the 1930s has a lot to offer on this kind of “love.”

The line between a cultured, decadent metropolitan man and a mere sensuous animal in the urban jungle -- the writings of the New Perceptionists do not go beyond these two ends of the same spectrum -- is probably that the former is more articulate about the “essence” suggested by the aesthetic aura (if there is any) and he is more philosophical and self-conscious about what he is looking for. According to Liuyuan’s cultural aesthetics, Liusu’s look and mannerisms suggest that she is a “real” Chinese woman, by which he does not mean something profound such as embodying the essence of Chinese ethics or Chinese spirituality (how much he knows of that is very uncertain), instead what he means is that “real Chinese women are the world’s most beautiful women. They’re never out of fashion.” “...Chinese women, when they sit around, aren’t even good at fattening up – since even that needs some energy. So it turns out that laziness has its advantages!” In other words, what he sees is a projection of his own decadent self: aesthetically pleasant laziness and inertia.

II.2. Do I have a faith? Ethics of authenticity and the elusive self

In a sense the two main characters in *Love* initially have liked each other enough to strike a “love at first sight”: Liusu finds that Liuyuan “gives her wonderful sensuous stimulation” and Liuyuan finds her beauty and aura suiting his aesthetics and inarticulated attitudes. But both will be disappointed when they try to get more from the other party: Liuyuan finds that Liusu does not understand him enough and does not care to understand him – Liusu does not believe in “romantic love” or things like finding the soul mate, not to mention she is a narcissist. Beside that Liuyuan’s problems also greatly contribute to their failure in achieving trust and intimacy.

About Liuyuan we know as much as Liusu does for the narrative is mostly from her point of view. Given Liusu’s limited exposure to the metropolitan cultural setting, it is to be expected that she has no understanding of the decadent philosophy of Liuyuan. But what is unusual is the fact that she even has problem understanding Liuyuan as a person. In the text the readers are told that Liusu finds Liuyuan a fickle person; and that she also finds his temperament “eccentric” (*guguai*). Liusu is short of the language to articulate Liuyuan’s personality, with which this study can probably help.

Beside being a decadent individualist and a metropolitan man – the relatively more accountable aspects of Liuyuan’s personality, there are equal number of features that make Liuyuan unaccountable: his behavior shows plenty of inconsistencies and incongruities. In Liuyuan’s first heart-felt conversation with Liusu he proclaims that “I don’t understand myself – but I want you to understand me! I want you to understand me!” If his longing for

companionship and understanding is very touching here, the fact that he is even *opaque to himself* rings an alarm bell and explains his incongruities.

Liuyuan's personality seems to be what J. W. Burrow called "the elusive self" (Burrow 147-164). The term might be foreign, but actually anyone versed in modern literature is quite familiar with the personality type and the problem that Burrow attempts to address: almost simultaneous to the upholding of individualism as a positive value and cultural ideal, there emerged literary works that featured split self, inconsistent self, multiple personalities -- selves that claim the dignity and rights of individualism but do not promise a recognizable or accountable *character* to be socially accountable; selves that, like Liuyuan, cannot even understand themselves. From Ding Ling's Miss Sophie to the male protagonists in the very popular works of Yu Dafu, Zhang Ziping and the New Perceptionists, readers encounter, again and again, modern selves that are made enigmatic but also problematic by contradiction, inconsistency or downright schizophrenia.

Strangely, the champion of individualism is not necessarily always a champion of character -- especially not in the school of decadence. Du Heng, in defense of Mu Shiying, once made a point about unified personality as a form of hypocrisy.¹⁰⁷ Mu Shiying himself pronounced that he lived "a dual, even triple, quadruple ... infinitely layered life" and confessed: "I am positive, I am negative; I am yes, I am no; I am a man of no equilibrium, no middle ground."¹⁰⁸

A tone of defiance and ruthlessness are to be detected between these lines. The same innocent ruthlessness shown in Mu's confession is also to be found in Liuyuan's behavior, which makes Liusu at one point think of him not only fickle but also "cruel." It is

¹⁰⁷ Du Heng [as Su Wen]. "About Mu Shiying's Creative Work" (*Guanyu Mu Shiying de chuangzuo*), quoted in Shih Shumei, *The Lure of the Modern*, p312.

this fickleness combined with cunning that makes Liusu no match to Liuyuan in the power struggle between them. When Liusu comes back to Hong Kong for a second time – she has to, for he has already ruined her reputation -- what he offers is to make Liusu his mistress (not wife, as Liusu wishes). Then after a week together he leaves for Britain for “a year or so” without showing any qualms. Does he love or not love Liusu? And how much does he love her? Probably even he himself is not clear.

It is easy to explain all this as manifestations of a businessman’s craftiness and cold-heartedness – which is exactly the misinterpretation that Liusu makes of his behavior. Any reader who can see beyond Liusu’s limited and biased lens will recognize, however, that Liuyuan’s “ruthlessness” comes from another source. The source links him to many such heart-breakers in the stories of *haipai* literature. From the point of view of those hearts that they break, they are being cruel; from the point of view of themselves, they are simply being “true” to themselves.

The question is: since when has such “truthfulness” become a good thing so that those who live and act by that principle feel no moral qualms, while others suffer as a result? In a very insightful study on the malaises of modernity, Charles Taylor recounts a development in modern ethics since the age of Rousseau which increasingly upholds what he calls “ethics of authenticity”:[The ethics of authenticity] is born ... out of a shift in the centre of gravity of the moral demand on us: self-truth and self-wholeness are seen more and more not as means to be moral, as independently defined, but as something valuable for their own sake” (Talylor 64-65).

Borrowing Charles Taylor’s lens, people like the real life Mu Shiying and the fictional Fan Liuyuan are acting out of the ethics of authenticity – they are just being *true*

¹⁰⁸ Quoted in Shi Shumei, *The Lure of the Modern*, p312.

or authentic to their selves, which is made an ethical “good” since the Romantic period. Related to this is of course the notion of individualism. With the rise of individualism, not only has our social life seen a fundamental change, even our *ethical* scale is reset.

Living the so-called “ethics of authenticity” to its logical conclusion and pursuing it for its own sake creates multiple problems. First, as Taylor points out, there is the conflict between the demands of truth to oneself and the demands of “intersubjective justice” (63). This is well illustrated by the case between Liuyuan and Liusu – what Liuyuan might consider innocent actions from being true to himself are perceived by Liusu as *unjust* and cruel. Largely this is a dilemma facing any individualist: being true to oneself or being accountable to the demands that society or other people place on oneself, which one should receive ethical priority?

In private relationships this problem is further magnified: during the modern period the intimate relationship is rewritten as a *private* rather than social matter, *as one of the primary sites where one should be true to oneself, and oneself only*. As a result, not only social dimensions of the matter are dismissed (the conventions and expectations of society and family), even the *interpersonal* dimension of the matter – between the couple themselves – suffers under the new ethical imperative to be “true” to oneself only.

Second, being “true” to oneself could mean limits to self-growth and social malaise. What good does it bring, being true only to oneself, if the self is hardly stable and coherent and more or less a product of circumstances? Too often, in romantic and decadent literature, one sees cases in which very broken, deformed and split kinds of selves are celebrated and guarded out of sincere adherence to the cult of authenticity. This

phenomenon does not end with romantic and decadent literature, it continues into contemporary rock-'n-roll, punk and other forms of alternative culture.

One cannot help asking: how does the noble cause of individualism lead to such laughable results? What went wrong?

The ethics of authenticity, advocated by the romantics like Rousseau, or by the May Fourth intellectuals, was meant to be the means to fight an oppressive social and moral order. The authentic self that they urged people to be “true” to had an innate model: be it the “natural” man (the romantic individualist’s belief) or one that is closest to a universal humanity (the Enlightenment individualist’s belief). Now in decadence and other vulgarized romantic projects, the Enlightenment and high romanticism’s normative notions of man or humanity are downplayed, yet, the ethics of authenticity is retained. Thus one starts to see the phenomenon that young men and women take pride in being “true” to selves that are neither natural nor conforming to any ideal model of humanity.

In a modern urban environment that is neither natural nor humanistic, this means that all kinds of deformations of humanity and all kinds of alienated, twisted, incoherent and split selves proudly march around in the name of individual freedom and authenticity. The metropolitan city, with its inclusive nature, with splitness and multifacetedness as part of its essence (as I discussed in the last section), is not a very good place to nourish coherence. Mu Shiyong, who celebrates *authenticity of incoherence* in the above-quoted confession, brilliantly embodies the above-named cluster of developments.

Less pronounced and self-conscious compared to the real life figure Mu Shiyong, the fictional figure Liuyuan wears his laughable contradictions with the same entitlement, and is “true” to his moods and whims with the same authenticity. He proves hard to

understand even for himself; but still he believes that there is a “self” under the name of Liuyuan, and he believes that it is very important and necessary for his companion to grasp, understand and appreciate that self.

Just as Liusu the narcissist can only *love herself*, Liuyuan the extreme individualist only cares about being *true to himself*. To both of them the notion of “love” being a life-shattering, self-changing experience would be a dream only -- both are firmly entrenched in their own selves, despite the longing for inter-subjective understanding and interpersonal relationship. In this light, Zhang is totally justified to call both of them “selfish” -- only this should have deeper meaning than the common moralist meaning such as being egoistic and lacking altruism; rather it is about a very large phenomenon in the modern period that Charles Taylor sums up as “the centering on the self.” The above discussions have meant to demonstrate that their “selfishnesses” are not idiosyncratic but have deep social and cultural roots and are shared by countless modern urban men and women.

Part III: Romance in a Fallen City – beyond Modernity

Being Zhang’s most controversial novella, *Love* is a work that resists categorization. In the above sections I have made the case arguing that *Love* is a highly penetrating, realistic account of modern urban individualisms and their pathological manifestations in personal relationship. Having said that, I will also concede that the popular reception of this novella as a romance is not wrong either. My thesis is this: in *Love*

Zhang relies on realism to capture the “human, all too human” modern existence; for the larger-than-life, the extraordinary elements that make up a *romance*, she turns to things that the moderns do not or could not have. I call them the “others” to the modern. By doing that, Zhang has accomplished two things at the same time: 1) she has managed to create a romance to meet the readers’ desires; 2) by building the romance on things that are not modern, she has further reinforced her realist critique of modernity.

III.1 The first “other” to the modern: apocalypse and romance as unstable salvation

The readers of the futile courtship between this modern couple (or of the above, lengthy analysis of it) would probably want a way “out” -- a way out of this mess called individualism and modern selves. Such simple desire and demand to find a way out – in any manner possible, no matter how incredible or unpractical it is – is exactly the fundamental human psychology that creates the need for *romance*. (Frye 28-31).

Northrop Frye and Frederic Jameson are two critics that come to mind who seek to identify the “real” impulses and messages behind unlikely romance plots. Frye discerns a Biblical, salvational impulse behind the romance genre, which is, according to his observation, often assimilated to a re-expression of Utopian longings. Frye thinks that the vitality and persistence of the romance mode proves that the salvational and Utopian impulse is the ultimate source and paradigm of all storytelling. Decades later, Jameson reads romance as the expression of “the political unconscious” – a Western-Marxist and poststructuralist re-rendering of what Frye means by “salvation” and “Utopia” (Jameson 103-151),

Looking at romance in this light, one should take romance plots very seriously: that is, instead of obsessing with the question “is this realistic or credible,” it might be more meaningful to ask the question “what are the political unconscious and the Utopian longings behind this romance plot?”

Indeed, if one looks at “romance” in Frye or Jameson’s terms – as Utopian *intervention in reality* -- one can easily recognize the uncanny connection and commonality between two seemingly unrelated events in the 1940s of China: one is the historical event in the 1940s of Yen’an, where a Utopian program against capitalism and modernity including modern individualism started to be articulated; the other is the fictional event in Zhang’s bestselling novella, in which Zhang designed a “happy ending” for Liusu and Liuyuan’s futile modern courtship by letting an apocalyptic war temporarily shatter modern civilization and destroy the social soil for modern individualisms.

Taking account of this second ending of the novella (in the first ending Liusu succumbs to various pressures and becomes Liuyuan’s mistress), Zhang could be one of the most radical thinkers of her era -- there cannot be a more acerbic critique of modern civilization than envisioning possible happiness for modern man and woman to be conditioned by the destruction of the former.

In this “happy” ending Zhang depicts how Liusu and Liuyuan start to be true to each other when they are, as the result of the all-destroying war, stripped of their modern personalities to become bare man and woman – fending for each other’s life in desperate situations, depending on each other in the daily struggle for survival. In the extreme setting of wartime confinement and scarcity, they start to develop a relationship built on mutual reliance and partnership, trust and closeness, which their seemingly very “romantic”

courtship has never achieved. In short, they can no longer afford to be individuals; when they find that they cannot live without the other person, they find themselves much closer to each other.

In a sense Zhang Ailing's fictional proposition is not unlike the radical program practiced in Yan'an. The way she has "changed" Liusu and Liuyuan from narcissistic and anarchic egoists to laboring partners is very similar to the programs that Mao envisioned for the decadent modern intellectuals who flocked to Yan'an. The latter involved stripping the modern intellectuals of two essential aspects of their modernness: the material comfort of modern civilization, and the culture of modern individualism. At bottom, both Zhang's and Yan'an's radicalisms show the distrust of partial reparations of the modern society, and both envision a *totalistic* -- and for that reason radical -- critique of modernity and modern civilization.

Drawing the connection between Zhang's and Yan'an's radicalism is not to obscure the fact that one is fictional while the other is a real political event. This being said, it is not yet the real crucial difference between the two. The truly significant difference between them is that, while both envision totalistic social renewals, Zhang's starting point is stubbornly liberal – *for Zhang social renewal is to serve the purpose of personal renewal, not the other way around as is the case of the radicalism of Yen'an.*¹⁰⁹ This brings Zhang into the league of a handful modernist visionaries such as Yeats, Eliot and Pound in the West, or Shen Congwen in China, who, having seen through the spiritual and

¹⁰⁹ So on one hand, Zhang shows an apocalyptic vision that is rare among even the most bourgeois radical thinkers on "love," who either, following an iconoclastic/anarchist pattern, posited "love" against social confines and norms; or, following a romanticist pattern, posited "love" against philistine and ascetic inhibitions; but rarely does one see a vision that posits "love" against modernity and modern civilization

social malaises of the modern and having desired renewals for the modern individuals, believed that personal renewal was impossible without first having social and cultural renewal. The communist movement, having emerged simultaneous to the modernist movement, believed in just the opposite: social and cultural renewal is not possible without first personal renewal. The process is the same, but ends and purposes are diametrically opposite.

Indeed, no matter how much Zhang's characters suffer from the consequences of egoism, being a self proclaimed *shanghairen*, Zhang has never entertained the solution of collectivism. In a sense it is almost impossible for a true Shanghai urbanite to entertain the notion of collectivism: Urbanite individualism may not be ideologically articulate, but it is in a sense even more stubborn exactly because it does not ideological and does not arise from any transcendental values system, but from the practical needs, from *the reality of modern economic life*. I agree with the Chinese critic Xu Daoming who observes that all the essential traits of modern economic life, be it rationalism, professionalism, or labor division, hinge on individualization. He claims that "Shanghai culture is first of all characterized by individualism; compared to feudalisms it is a historical progress" (Xu 51).

But Zhang is not a traditional kind of liberal either. While showing both affinity with and difference from the Yan'an programs, Zhang also displays convergence and divergence with the modernist liberals. One subtle but important difference between Zhang and the other (especially Western) liberal thinkers is that, what Zhang understands under "personal (renewal)" is not necessarily "individual." In *Love*, the "happy ending" that Zhang proposes after the apocalyptic clean up is neither collective social Utopia nor

itself. Shen Congwen is probably the only other major novelist that systematically espouses the same anti-modern modernist stance.

individualistic self-renewal. Instead, out of the baptism of war Zhang has envisioned the birth of “an ordinary couple.”

What kind of “utopia” is that? Being acutely aware of the malaises in modern relationships and yet stoutly shunning any form of collectivism, Zhang’s “Utopia” is a *small scale sociability* called “a couple” – something that is pitted against *both* asocial individualisms *and* collectivism. This is the true significance of the seemingly trivial idea called “an ordinary couple,” which Zhang used a war and a total destruction of the modern civilization to make possible.

Beside advocating small scale sociability, Zhang’s idea of “an ordinary couple” has another layer of unorthodoxy embedded in it. That is the return to the ordinary and the *everyday*. What makes the “everyday” unorthodox is that in much of modern history, the best social ideals were formed on the premise to escape from or go against the everyday life -- be it the personal ideal of romantic love (romanticism in the personal realm) or the ideal of total revolution (romanticism in the collective social realm). It is true that that these reactions were against the *reified* everyday life of urban capitalism, but in the process they have thrown out the baby with the bathwater - - having fostered a pan-romantic ethos that upholds idealism and social heroism and undervalues everyday life in general.¹¹⁰

While social romanticism continued in Yan’an, in the occupied areas an opposite trend -- what Edward Gunn called “antiromanticism” – was forming. The ideal of romantic love, that is, romanticism in the personal realm, was the first “victim” of this trend. Writers who shared Zhang’s interest in the subject of relationship and marriage, as diverse as the

¹¹⁰ In “A writing of one’s own” (1944), Zhang starts her essay by speaking against such a pan-romantic ethos in modern China’s cultural life.

New Popular Literature writer Yu Qie and the scholar-writer Qian Zhongshu, seemed to agree on one common recognition: that is, the relationship between two human beings is not a place to find romantic escape from society, nor a place to completely be oneself; rather, it is profoundly *social* in its own way. Anyone who holds unrealistic, romantic ideals about it will suffer bitter disappointment.

In Qian's now canonized novel *Besieged City* (1947), the impractical and slightly womanizing Fang Hongjian returns from his study abroad. He feels increasing cynicism and isolation as he meets all kinds of corruption and hypocrisies at his teaching posts – people that are immoral even by the loose ethical standard of the not-so-noble Hongjian. But the greatest sense of isolation that he ends up feeling is actually in his personal relationship – his marriage to Sun Roujia, a fellow teacher. So much about the idea of “home” as the heaven of true self and as a warm escape from a cold, impersonal world. But at the end of the novel, after a profoundly humiliating row and a run-away, Hong-jian has no choice but to return home, for he is exhausted and needs to sleep.

Works like these, while being a supreme example of the mature realism that emerged across the scattered literary scenes of the 1940s – realism freed of the influence of romanticism, sentimentalism and melodrama, and of ideological formula – feel very cruel and disheartening exactly because they are so true to human reality. Upon reading them, one is tempted to ask: truthful they might be, what satisfaction and solace, however, do these works offer? Of what use, after all, is the wise, title page aphorism of the book “those who are outside want to get in while those inside want to get out”?

In essence, these narratives are hopelessly trapped in “reality” as such, in which the principle of realism – exactly because it is so thorough – starts to feel like, using Fredric

Jameson's words, "an asphyxiating, self-imposed penance" (Jameson 104). The uniqueness of Zhang's novella lies in that, while she shares the 1940s' anti-romanticism, she refuses to simply fall back to reified realism. As Fredric Jameson brilliantly put it:

It is in the gradual reification of realism in late capitalism that romance once again comes to be felt as the place of narrative heterogeneity and of freedom from that reality principle to which a now oppressive realistic representation is the hostage. Romance again seems to offer the possibility of sensing *other historical rhythms*, and of *demonic or Utopian transformations of a real* now unshakably set in place (Jameson 103-104, emphasis mine)

Zhang's apocalypse plot has to be understood in this light.

If the second, romance ending of Zhang's novella shows her stand against the reality of modernity and modern love, and her refusal to be trapped in the "real" as such, what she proposes following the apocalypse shows her determination to at the same time break free of the romanticism that colored all social and personal ideals of the modern period. It is against such a background that Zhang's seemingly very placid ideal of "an ordinary couple" becomes a critique of both of the two dominant trends of her time – realism on one hand and romanticism on the other.

Indeed, Zhang has bested her contemporary writers on both fronts: she has been a supreme and incisive realist when she depicts the modern malaises that make personal relationships futile and fruitless; but at the same time she allows herself and her readers the satisfaction of their utopian longings -- longings for a way out of the depressing reality, even if it is through fictional and improbable (improbable but not impossible) situations – that is, through the strategies of a "lowly" romance.¹¹¹ Last but not least, the "Utopia" she

¹¹¹ The design of the war situation is an example when romance is used strategically. Here it is on several levels simultaneously: it allows a happy ending for the love affair (the happy ending being an essential element for any romance); it allows the release of the Utopian energies in the readers while not resorting to the utopian social programs that were advocated in reality.

offers to the readers' satisfaction is not "Utopian" in the romantic, revolutionary or heroic sense of the word – it is free of romanticism in all forms, personal or collective. It is a Utopia of the everyday.

III. 2. The second "other" to the modern: the archaic and the mythical

Speaking of what Jameson calls the "other historical rhythms" that make romance a less reified form of fiction than realism, I want to immediately point out that it is not just the *future* that breathes romantic magic into Zhang's morbid realist account of the moderns; the rhythm of the *past* is also an enchanting and transcending force in the novella.

Many commentators have commented on the *cangliang* (desolation) atmosphere of the novella, which is engineered through a systematic injection of the past and mythic elements to the characterization and the setting of the novella. These elements haunt and enchant an otherwise very worldly modern courtship. The function of these past and mythic elements remains to be articulated – are they merely decorations to make the story "feel" romantic? Or are they meant to play a more substantial role?

Let me first look at what kind of past and mythic motifs are introduced in the novella. The first sets of motifs from the past are consciously conjured up by the characters themselves. Around the Liusu character hovers the imagery of the traditional opera singer – Liuyuan observes that some of Liusu's gestures, in spite of her modern and calculating self, rather remind one of traditional opera, and that something about her gives the impression that she is "not from this world." For the Liuyuan character, his repeated allusions to verses from the *Book of Poetry* (*shijing*), which paint a blissful picture of

simple but enduring love, offset his modern metropolitan personality and provide rare moments of serenity and clarity to the constant cat-and-mouse chase between the two protagonists.

The second category of associations and imageries in the novella are situational – they are in the background, in the environment, but are not consciously acted upon by the characters themselves. One set mostly involves things *historical* and *archaic*: these include the sound imagery of the Chinese fiddle that plays opera themes against the background of city’s thousand lights, and the imagery of the ancient, decrepit brick wall, against which Liusu’s transient beauty is contrasted. The other set involves things *natural* and *primeval* including the motif of the ocean spilling into the hotel room, or the motifs of tropical forest and flora, one of which is described as “unbearably red.” The passage reads as follows:

When they reached Repulse Bay, he helped her out of the taxi, then pointed to the dense copse alongside the road. ‘Do you see the tree?’ It’s Southern variety. The English call it ‘flame of the forest.’ ‘Is it red?’ asked Liusu. ‘Red!’ In the darkness, Liusu couldn’t see the red, but she knew instinctively that it was the reddest red, red beyond belief (Kingsbury 138, with my modifications).

What is interesting in this passage is the fact that Liusu actually can not see the red in the darkness, but she “knew instinctively” how red it is. Throughout the novella, the natural or archaic imageries have worked in this manner: it is very hard to tell whether it is these objects or something inside the characters themselves that are at work. What exactly is the source of these primeval and archaic sentiments? Nature or humanity? History or the modern humans? The answer is probably both.

Does that mean that these two characters are romantics? Not really. Right after the above conversation on the “reddest red,” the two characters, within a few minutes’ span, go back to sophisticated and guarded flirting again. The truth is: while these motifs and images certainly bring a romantic aura to the story, that aura is eroded by the characters themselves, who, acting out of the modern side of their personalities, especially during moments of disillusionment, cast an ironic view on these romantic notions that they themselves conjure up.¹¹² The enchanted moments in which they act upon those tropes and associations have never acquired real substance that is enough to change the course of their modern and tortuous courtship.

These images and associations would not, however, simply disappear – they would linger in the readers’ consciousness and in the background of the modern, realistic story. *In other words, the fundamental realistic nature of the story is unchanged, while these motifs and images to certain extent serve to destabilize and disturb the realistic principle of the characters.*

In other words, these images – be they the historical and archaic, or natural and primeval – should rather be looked at as the suppressed “others” to the moderns. While the modern couple plays the modern courtship rituals, the suppressed natural and bodily instincts erupt from below and historical and spiritual images descend from above, bestowing upon these urbane moderns *anti-modern* and *anti-urban* aspects, which make them “romantic” – almost in spite of themselves.

¹¹² Those who read the novella as highly romantic piece are often smitten by these very enchanting passages and imageries and miss the ironic layer built into the work.

What exactly does it mean when one says “in spite of themselves”? What exactly is the source for these motifs? From without, meaning imposed by the author? Or from within – that is, being a part of the characters? If it is the latter, how can one say “in spite of themselves?”

The concept of the unconscious has to be introduced at this point. Just as the “violent passion” that awakens in Weilong makes her act almost in spite of her usual, rational self, in *Love Zhang* explores two kinds of unconscious that make the characters act differently from their usual, modern selves: the *cultural* unconscious crystallized in the historical and archaic imageries, and the *libidinal* unconscious conjured by the natural, primeval images. In other words, the images and metaphors are more than just ornaments to create a certain romantic or *cangliang* atmosphere, they are meant to be taken literally – *they are true aspects of the characters, in the manner that dreams are true (but not necessarily realistic) aspects of ourselves.*

Interestingly, the most truthful moment in Liusu and Liuyuan’s courtship is perceived by Liusu as a dream – she feels very touched by it, but the next morning she is uncertain whether it has been real. So she goes about the flirtation just as usual. In that “dream” Liuyuan tells her, through a midnight phone call, that he loves her; and, despite her impatient interruptions, he insists on reciting a verse from *The Book of Poetry*:

Liuyuan didn’t say anything. Then, after a long while, he said “In *The Book of Poetry* there’s a verse – “

“I don’t understand that sort of thing,” Liusu cut in.

“I know you don’t understand,” Liuyuan said impatiently. “If you understood, I wouldn’t need to explain! So listen:

‘Facing life, death, distance

Here is my promise to thee –

I take thy hand in mine:

We will grow old together’ (Kingsbury 149).

Although resisting at first, Liusu has after a little while finally succumbed to her inner, true feelings -- the touching traditional verse has worked almost cathartically, allowing something “true” to surface in spite of herself. For the first time, she sobs in front of Liuyuan. But the next day, the rational and narcissistic Liusu dismisses the whole thing as a dream and continues the mouse-and-cat business with Liuyuan.

So the secret of the *cangliang* atmosphere in the novella and the secret how Zhang manages to create a sense of tragedy out of the modern creatures is this: while she so clearly sees the modern urban men and women as “little people,” she does not see them as *only* little people. She does not see them as *only* modern either. Throughout the novella, the images and allusions that bear the collective cultural memory – or, psychologically speaking, the cultural unconscious – haunt the characters (as well as the readers). It is as if these unconscious selves are the unacknowledged parts of the characters, which make them, in spite of their modern selves, capable of sublime longings and emotions.

Sounds like “the return of the repressed” story? It is. But it is the Jungian, not the Freudian, narrative on the return of the repressed. A crucial difference between Freud and Jung is that Freud, even in using mythological terms like the Oedipus complex, always refers to the unconscious as the part of an *individual* psychology formed in childhood experience or early family life, whereas Jung is interested in the collective unconscious shared by a given society or a given culture, as a reservoir of the experiences and memories of *a human specie*, not just an individual.¹¹³

In her essays and fiction, Zhang shows knowledge of both Freud and Jung. Not only has Zhang mentioned Jung in her essays (such as “On Reading” 1976), she has even applied Jung’s concept of the collective unconscious to her analysis of culture and social

psychology. In her essay “Beijing Opera in The Eyes of The Foreigner” (1943), Zhang Ailing describes Beijing opera’s main characteristic as offering the viewers a set of timeless, standard situations, which preserve instinctual, inchoate experiences of the earlier generations in a stylized or ritualistic form. The experience of watching such an opera is on one hand destructive of the genuine individuality of the viewer and on the other hand binds the present viewer with the mythical past; and she thinks that in such a phenomenon lies one of the secrets for the timelessness and enduring youthfulness of Chinese culture.

In her manifesto-like essay “A writing of one’s own” (1944), Zhang has again, in response to Fu Lei’s criticism of *Love in A Fallen City*, referred to something like the collective memory, this time in direct relation to the modern people and their existential state:

Humans live in a [present] era, but this era sinks like a shadow and the humans feel abandoned. In order to prove one’s existence and hold on to something true and most basic, one has to resort to the ancient memories, the memories of the humans’ lived experiences through the ages. . . .

The era I am writing in is such an era. I think the method of uneven contrast is proper [for this era]. I use this method to record the memories of the humans’ lived experiences through the ages, in order to bring illuminations to the reality around.¹¹⁴

This passage not only confirms the Jungian influence on Zhang’s philosophy and fiction, it also indicates the role that the Jungian elements play in Zhang’s fictional text.

Those who insist on a romantic reading of Zhang’s novella miss the link between the concept of the unconscious, the meaning of the word “romantic” and Zhang’s notion of the “uneven contrast” in the above quote.

¹¹³ See *The Cambridge Companion to Jung* (2008) for an up to date reassessment of Jung’s legacy.

¹¹⁴ Zhang Ailing, Vol. IV, p174, my translation.

For both Freud and Jung, the unconscious is a descriptive term, not necessarily a value. The difference between Freud and the romantics is that for Freud the discovery of the unconscious means to recognize that the self has multiple layers, and some layers are more suppressed than the others and have thus become “unconscious”; whereas the Freudian romantics -- the most notable example being D. H. Lawrence – went to the point of claiming a new metaphysics based on the unconscious.¹¹⁵ To be a Freudian romantic means to believe that the unconscious is the ultimate site of meaning for the self and its subjectivity; and that it is a higher human value or existence that deserves to be pursued self-consciously and programmatically, as Lawrence appeared to advocate.¹¹⁶

The same could be said of the Jungian collective unconscious. Recognizing that there is one dimension of our psyche that is connected to the past is one thing, saying that the past is more ideal and desirable than the present, as believed by some nostalgic romanticists, is another. By assigning the historical and archaic side of Liusu and Liuyuan’s psyche to the realm of “dreams,” Zhang is acting as a realist, not a romantic Jungian writer: she appears to believe in the truth and reality of the cultural unconscious, without however exalting it into a new ideal of human existence.

Just as sincere attention to the eruption of the violent passion in Weilong does not make Zhang a believer in passion (that will make her a “romantic” like Lawrence), the attention to the cultural unconscious in the psyches of modern men and women like Liuyuan and Liusu does not automatically make Zhang a nostalgic reactionary. Like Freud or Jung, Zhang is simply describing, not prescribing.

¹¹⁵ See Chapter III for a more in-depth discussion of Lawrence’s philosophy and cultural politics constructed around the idea of unconscious.

The notion of “uneven contrast” is very interesting, for Zhang seems to suggest that this is the function that these memories and motifs of the past serve in her fictional text: to set the present reality into relief, to disturb the monologue of the present with “other historical rhythms.” The meaning of Zhang’s fictional text thus lies in *the contrast and the tension* between the present and the past, the reality principle and the romance principle -- neither side is the ultimate location of meaning.

So what exactly are people like Liuyuan and Liusu? Which parts of themselves – the modern parts, or the parts that point to the future and the past – are their “true” selves? I do not think Zhang will be interested in this kind of question, for she seems to rejoice in discovering that it is the fluidity of our subjectivity – between the rational and the libidinal, between the past and the present, between the status quo existence and the Utopian longings – that makes us vital moderns.

As Zhang’s only full-fledged romance, *Love is polyphonic* through and through: 1) on the realistic level, the courtship between Liuyuan and Liusu is polyphonic as they represent two different schools of urban individualism and bring very different values and understandings toward love and relationship; these co-play throughout the courtship process, without either sets submerging the other. 2) The futile and petty modern courtship on the realistic level is then juxtaposed with the sound bites from the future and motifs from the past, which give the novella the aura of romance. 3) But neither the future element nor the past elements are meant to take over reality -- in the third ending of the novella, Zhang lets Liusu and Liuyuan return to normalcy when the rest of the city returns to

¹¹⁶See O’Neil and Sandy, *Romanticism: Romanticism and History: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies* (Routledge 2006) for a thorough investigation into the complex relationship (sometimes

normalcy after the siege. This third ending adds a cynical touch to the miracles that have just happened in the romance plot and returns the reader to the reality principle again. 4) But, as if afraid to let that principle firmly settle in, Zhang immediately follows it with a fourth ending, where she connects Liusu's story to the ancient legend of a beauty who has once caused a city to fall, with the love that she has instigated in a great man, thus returning the story again to the platform of romance.

What is left with the reader after all this back and forth between realism and romance? Although the modern reality still makes the final call, "other historical rhythms" (Jameson 104), that of the Utopian future or the legendary past, linger on in the readers' consciousness. The circular movement between the realism and the romance modes throughout the novella achieves an effect in which reality is eerily reminded of its "other" and vice versa. In short, both the realist and the romantic principle are rendered unstable through these unresolved exchanges.

Love is romance, not escapist writing. Both future and past historical motifs serve to open up, using Jameson's words, a "place of narrative heterogeneity and of freedom from that reality principle to which a now oppressive realistic representation is the hostage" (104). While recognizing individual's situatedness in historical present and social reality, Zhang also recognizes the power of the apocalyptic and the mythic, which "save" the self from the passive mimesis of modernity.

– Or, not really a salvation, to be exact, but a disturbance and disruption of the real from being "unshakably set in place" (Jameson 104). After all, as Zhang has made clear: her aim is not revolution but revelation (*qishi*).

Chapter Three

Middle-class Sexuality: Sociology, Psychology and the Geo-Economy of Desire

Next to *Love in a Fallen City* (1943) and *The Golden Cangue* (1943), *Red Rose White Rose* (1944) is another of Zhang's works that is repeatedly staged or filmed, meaning, "popular." What is it about? The simple answer is: the novella is a life history of Zhenbao written under the sign of *sex* -- it is a history of his sexuality.

But complication immediately follows after this simple beginning, for "sexuality" is one of the most loaded and variously interpreted terms, probably as varied and elusive as the very concept of the modern, no matter in the Chinese or in the Western context. For the Western context, some critics describe sexuality as a key to the "hermeneutics of the self" in the West.¹¹⁷ In the Chinese context, almost simultaneous to the May Fourth "discovery" of the modern individual, something that is also to do with the individual, but not quite identical with it was "discovered": it was sex (*xing*), or to be exact, *sexuality in its modern sense*.

Humans have always had sex, but they have not perceived sex as the moderns have done. As one critic put it,

The modern Western notion of sexuality is that first, it is understood to be an independent entity, and second, it is seen as so important in the life and the identity of the individual. ... [when one uses this term in modern context] the implications [are]: that there is a discrete entity within me, or within society, which can be labeled in this way; that somehow it is separate from other aspects of me, as for example, my emotions, my social status, and so on; Most strikingly, sexuality is seen as an autonomous force, both socially and individually. It seems to have become split off from other

¹¹⁷ The phrase comes from David M. Halperin's "Saint Foucault," chapter 21 from Naomi Zack et al. ed. *Race, Class, Gender and Sexuality: the Big Questions* (Blackwell 1998).

aspects of human existence, and has acquired a life of its own (Horrocks 86-87).

Exactly because sex/sexuality holds such a central place in modern life and modern thinking, it inevitably takes on a complexity that is commensurate with modern society and modern individualisms. In the last chapter I have discussed how individualism manifests differently and acquires different contents with each different social and cultural group; so is the case with modern sexuality. A quick glance at the New Literature (*xin wenxue*) writers who predominantly featured sex and sexuality as their subject matters – from Yu Dafu, Mao Dun to Shen Congwen and Lu Ling¹¹⁸ – would indicate the varied possible forms that sexuality can take in modern experience and representations. And the range is infinitely enlarged if one includes writers who are rooted in different cultural traditions, such as the popular urban literature or the so-called *haipai* literature.

What is Zhang's approach on sexuality as it is reflected in *Red Rose White Rose* and others of her representative works? What makes Zhang Ailing unique in the above mapping of "sexuality and modern Chinese literature"? These are the questions that this chapter tries to answer.

My first observation is: just like the New Literature writers before her, Zhang writes about sex and sexuality reflectively and analytically -- this makes her different from popular literature writers; but like no other New Literature writer was able to do, Zhang has thoroughly intimated the values and attitudes of the modern *shimin* – or to be exact, the Shanghai middle-class *shimin* – toward sex and sexuality.

¹¹⁸ Lu Ling (1923-1994) was known for his novella *The Hungry Guo Sue (ji-e de Guo Sue 1942)* in which he boldly represents a working class woman's dual hungers: hunger for food and hunger for sex. His long fiction

In a sense *Red Rose White Rose* could be read as Zhang's thesis on middle-class sexuality – I call it a “thesis” because it has touched on such a full range (the fullest to her day) of the associated meanings that “sex” has acquired in modern culture in general and urban culture in particular.

One could approach sex or sexuality in the modern culture from (at least) the following three dimensions: in its *social* dimension, modern sexuality is formulated in face of the rise of women and is thus deeply connected with the issue of *gender* – that is, the reconfigurations of the role and meaning of the masculine and the feminine, and the power relations between the two sexes in modern relationships.¹¹⁹ In its *psychological* dimension modern sexuality is deeply connected with the Freudian “discovery” of the unconscious and accompanying it brand new understandings of selfhood and human psyche. In its *material* dimension, sexuality is conceived by the moderns as a libidinal energy or entity, which could be decoupled from either the social or the psychological self and becomes a free-circulating force in the erotically charged metropolitan urban scene and in the new consumer culture.

In this chapter I argue that *Red Rose White Rose* contains Zhang's observations on *all three* of the above-named dimensions of modern sexuality -- and specifically, she observed their manifestations in an average, Shanghai middle-class male.

I

Middle-class Sexuality: Gender and the Sociology of Sex

The Sons and Daughters of the Landlord (1944) is considered one of the best long fictions in the history of modern Chinese literature.

¹¹⁹ The gender issue is also an issue of power. As one scholar put it: “Freud (sex) and Hegel (power): With respect to the question of desire, twentieth-century continental philosophy has been preoccupied with two

If *Red Rose White Rose* can be read as the history of the protagonist Zhenbao's sexuality, in this section I will argue that his personal history, in its social dimension, has been made to symbolize the social history of gender in modern Shanghai.

From the very opening of the novella, the author-narrator suggests that we read the novella not just as the story of an isolated individual, but that of *an average, modern, urban male* -- using the original wording in the novella, as the story of an "ideal modern Chinese man." Following this opening the author has provided a social profile of Zhenbao, from which I derive the following observations.

Sociologically speaking, Zhenbao should represent the *new urbanite (xin shimin)* -- that is, the *shimin* version of the middle-class in Shanghai. Let's first look at how "middleclass" Zhenbao is:

Zhenbao had launched his career the proper way, by going to the West to get his degree and factory training. He was smart and well educated, and having worked his way through school, he had the energy and determination of a self-made man. Now he held an upper-level position in a well-known foreign textile company. His wife was a university student, and she came from a good family. ...One daughter, aged nine: already they'd made plans for her college tuition (Kingsbury 255).

But his middle-class-ness is the urbanite kind: he follows all the basic Chinese values and virtues, such as filial piety to one's parents, duties to one's younger siblings, devotion to one's job, loyalty to one's friends, so that "the literary youths and progressive types" "laughed at [him] and called him vulgar" (Kingsbury 256).

But these people "didn't really hold it against him," for "[Zhenbao] was vulgar in a Western way." Different from the traditional urbanites that one reads about in Shanghai's popular fiction of the 1920s, Zhenbao's philistine and "vulgar" ways bear the Western and

alternative formulations -- desire as sex and desire as power." Here the term "power" refers to the inter-subjective dimension of sex (Silverman 1).

modern imprint – he is not like those who “stand behind a counter in a shop, ...[whose] whole existence ...[being] one tiny round of ignorance and stupidity;” instead, “after his studies abroad, his window opened up to the whole world: he had plenty of opportunities to look forward to and the benefits of an unfettered mind” (Kingsbury 256). All these make Zhenbao a *new* urbanite. Or, he can be a spokesperson for *the philistine middleclass in general*, Chinese or Western.

Now let me clarify the sociological terms used in this chapter, mostly based on how they are used by scholars in the field of modern Chinese literature and culture.

The term “urbanite” (*shimin*) refers to a certain social and cultural make up and way of life that is mostly the offshoot of China’s own pre-modern, merchant capitalism and town culture. The term “middle-class” on the other hand refers to the social-economic product of modern industrial capitalism, which is largely modeled on the practice of the capitalist economies and societies in the West and brings with it the values and ideologies and lifestyle of the European bourgeoisie.

In the context of the novella the kind of profession that Zhenbao looks down at, “stand[ing] behind a counter in a shop, ...[whose] whole existence ...[being] one tiny round of ignorance and stupidity” is exactly typical profession and existence of a petty urbanite – the lower-middle class in the economic and social structure of merchant capitalism. Zhenbao, a textile engineer trained in Britain, is *professionally* a member of the “middle class” as defined above. But in terms of cultural leaning and way of life he might not be.

In China when Western-style industrialization and capitalism first took root in port cities like Shanghai, the values of the Western bourgeoisie were not immediately adopted. Many “middle-class” professionals (doctors, lawyers, entrepreneurs, engineers etc.) still lived a traditional rather than Western lifestyle, or they absorbed the Western lifestyle under the principles of Chinese culture. Culturally they should be called the urbanite while professionally belonging to the middleclass.

With the establishment of the new Republican government in Nanjing in 1927 and the subsequent formation of a National capitalism and a Chinese cosmopolitanism, more and more Chinese middle-class professionals distanced from the semi-traditional urbanite values and lifestyles and became more comfortable or were more open toward the European bourgeois culture and lifestyles, now further penetrated by a new international consumer culture taking shape in the 1930s. Such a new “middle-class” became the cultural mainstream by the mid 1930s.¹²⁰

During the 1940s, with the beginning of the war and the end of “the European Shanghai,”¹²¹ many of those trained in the Western schools and universities tended to lean more toward the traditional “urbanite” values and they called themselves the “new urbanites.”¹²²

No matter what is the starting point – the Chinese become Westernized bourgeoisie, or the Westernized leaning back to the Chinese urbanite way – the result is a more neutralized mixture of Chinese and Western, urbanite and bourgeois middle-class values. Thus, depending on what aspect of the Zhenbao character is discussed, either one of these

¹²⁰ For a thorough historical account of the said transformation see Marie-Claire Bergere, *The Golden Age of the Chinese Bourgeoisie, 1911-1937* (Cambridge 1989).

¹²¹ For the social history of Shanghai in the 1940s see Yeh, Wen-hsin ed. *Wartime Shanghai* (Routledge 1998).

two terms will be used – “middle-class” referring to his professional status and Western elements in his lifestyle and personality; “urbanite” refers to his family background, upbringing and the urbanite Chinese elements in his values and attitudes. In contexts when these distinctions can not be made or are not important, such as in regard to the attitudes toward women that are common to the middle-class man and the urbanite men, I will use these terms as interchangeable.

Corresponding to the “ideal modern Chinese man” that he is, Zhenbao’s reactions in sexual matters are strikingly “typical” – in the sense that they almost match Shanghai’s popular, philistine middleclass/urbanite attitude toward women during the Republican era without missing a beat.

In a very broad outline, Shanghai’s popular attitude on gender and sexuality could be said to have gone through the following three major stages of change: i) the first major change, as captured by the surge of the new *xiaoxie xiaoshuo* (Novel of Prostitution and Obscenity) between the 1900s and the 1920s, witnessed the sexual capital of the city being transferred from the bureaucratic and literati men to the merchants, and the emphasis from “qing” (sentiment) to “xing” (sex).¹²³ This is a trend that accompanied the increase of the numbers of prostitutes in the city and consequently the “democratization” and commercialization of the sex industry. ii) The second major change occurred after the establishment of the Nationalist government in 1927 and the New Culture ideology’s

¹²² The term “new urbanite” became the name for a recognizable cultural attitude in the 1940s, signaled by the so-called “New Urbanite Literature” (*xin shimin wenxue*).

¹²³ According to the statistic quoted in Tang Zhesheng’s *Zhongguo xiandai tongshu xiaoshuo liubian shi*, in 1900, prostitutes constituted 12.5% of the female Chinese population in the concessions. He calls books like *Shanghai Flowers* (*haishanghua liezhuan*) and *Turtle of Nine Tails* (*jiuwei gui*) *haipai xiaoxie xiaoshuo* and notes that: *haipai xiaoxie xiaoshuo* likewise focuses on the affairs between men and women, but different from

becoming mainstream, which condemned prostitution and upheld the ideal of love-sex and the nuclear family. More or less simultaneous with that change, new kinds of “public” women – from “liberated” young female students and socially active women, to stars in the new urban entertainment industry (singers and actresses) and female workers in the new urban entertainment venues such as bars, dance halls etc.— became the new targets of fear and curiosity, desire and anxiety of the male urban commoners.¹²⁴ iii) During the war and especially the Japanese occupation, the city was subdued in extravagance and erotic glamour, and a new cult of domesticity surfaced. But this domesticity was highly ambiguous – as commentators of the 1940s’ new erotic novels pointed out, many of the earlier themes of social and sexual anarchy simply moved indoors, to the private space of a married household.¹²⁵

Parallel to these changes there was another change that was also central to the issue of gender and sexuality. This was the decline in arranged marriages and the spread of the ideal of conjugal marriage. Masculinity and manhood were redefined -- it was articulated not according to the values of feudal patriarchy, but according to *a new bourgeois/philistine ideal of domesticity*. The middle class/urbanite men’s attitude toward the various kinds of “public” women – from prostitute and liberated female students to socially promiscuous women in or out of marriage – is thus ambivalent. They desire them and at the same time are anxious about their threat to the ideal of domesticity and the order of male dominance.

those novels [before them] that wrote about the feeling of grief, infatuation and sadness between men and women, these new novels wrote about the playful, the pretentious and the flirtatious feelings (Tang 93).

¹²⁴ See Gail Hershatter, *Dangerous Pleasures: Prostitution and Modernity in Twentieth-century Shanghai*, for detailed account of the above-delineated change.

¹²⁵ See Nicole Huang, *Women, War, Domesticity: Shanghai Literature and Popular Culture of the 1940s* for the surge of domesticity in this period. And see commentaries on the literature of the Fudan clan in occupied Shanghai for continued preoccupation with sex (and even pornography) in the literary culture of the period.

The position of the middle-class male was very volatile in face of the above-named material and ideological changes regarding gender roles and power relations between the two sexes. On one hand, sex in all its varieties became ubiquitously available to the middle-class man; on the other hand it was even harder for the middle-class male to own or control any of his sexual objects. Not to mention whether the above-named categories of women were willing or not to be domesticated; as an average middle-class man, he often could not afford, *financially or socially*, to “own” his sexual objects – as concubine, as long-term mistress or as wife.

Zhenbao’s sexual history in *Red Rose White Rose* is socially and ideologically highly symbolic. It recounts Zhenbao the middle-class/urbanite Shanghai man’s sexual experience with three different kinds of “public” women -- first a prostitute, second a “liberated” young female student, and third a woman who is “free” even after being married. These three kinds of “dangerous” women happen to correspond to the above-named three stages of change in the popular attitude regarding gender and sexuality.

I. 1. The prostitute

Zhenbao’s first sexual experience is his encounter with a white, low-class prostitute as a student tourist in Paris. The humility and shame over experiencing one’s first sex with such a woman is imaginable – Yu Dafu has written brilliantly about such “fallen” experiences.¹²⁶ But Zhenbao the urbanite man’s burden is very different from that of a literati like Yu Dafu. What bothers him is not the moral shame – for as Zhang Ailing put it,

¹²⁶ Yu Dafu’s short stories often feature the experience of prostitution and always links that experience to fallenness, self-hatred and self abandonment. See stories like “The Nostalgic Man” (*huanxiang bing zhe*, 1922), “Autumn willow” (*qiuliu*, 1924) and “Prayer” (*qiyuan*, 1927). Shih Shumei’s book features an

the urbanite world is an amoral world, everything stops at “being worldly wise ” (*zhiyu shigu*, “On reading” 1976), what disturbs Zhenbao is rather the thought that “[s]uch a woman. Even such a woman, having spent money on her, he still can’t be her master [*zhuren*]” (Kingsbury 258).

What is striking is the contrast between the slackness of moral sensibility and the very tautness of the patriarchal masculine nerve. Zhenbao is not troubled by moral shame, as his reflections on the event tell us: “Whoring can be sleazy, low-class, filthy-miserable, and it won’t matter – that just makes it all the earthier. But it was never *like this*.”¹²⁷ What is the “like this” that is so disturbing? The text has the answer:

There was a detail he could never forget. She was putting her clothes back on, pulling her dress over her head, and when she was half there, . . . she stopped for a moment. Right then, he saw her in the mirror. [Her] hair, pulled tight by the dress so that only her long, thin face showed. . . *It was a cold, severe, masculine face, the face of an ancient warrior. Zhanbao’s nerve felt grave shock.*¹²⁸

Unbearable to Zhenbao is the male, even warrior-like, look from a sexual subject, which is supposed to be inferior to and patronized by him. What is “shaken” here is not Zhenbao’s moral conscience but *the entrenched and very insecure nerve of his middle-class masculinity*, which strains to maintain, amid threats and volatilities, male superiority and patriarchal control.

The “lesson” that Zhenbao has learnt from this experience is that “from that day on [he] is determined to create a ‘right’ universe to carry with him. In that mini universe he is to be the *absolute master [juedui de zhuren]*” (Kingsbury 259).

interesting discussion of this theme in Yu Dafu. Shih thinks these stories are building a link between “physical and spiritual wandering” (121).

¹²⁷Based on Kingsbury’s translation (259), with some modification. Italics mine.

I.2. The New Woman

Zhenbao's second amorous experience is with a British-Chinese college girl named Rose. She is much fun – both of them like to be “fast paced,” often “visiting several dance clubs on one Saturday night.” But something is not right. Here is Zhenbao's complaint:

Her short skirt ended above her knees, and her legs were light and nimble, as delicately made as wooden legs in a shop window; . . . Her hair was cut very short, shaved down to a little point at the nape of her neck. No hair to protect her neck, no sleeves to protect her arms, she is an open book to men, everybody can get something from her. She was carefree with Zhenbao, and he put that down to her being innocent, but her being so carefree with everyone struck him as slightly nutty.¹²⁹

Once again Zhenbao the middle-class/urbanite man shows his self-contradiction. The reason that he chooses Rose over other female classmates is because “he was . . . a busy man who couldn't spend lots of time courting; naturally he liked girls who were a little more forthright.” And he found the few female classmates from China “too affected, too churchy, altogether too pious” (Kingsbury 259). In other words, on one hand, he is a *modern* middle-class man, living a fast-paced life and seeking fast-paced sensuous satisfaction and thus has a taste for *the modern girl*. On the other hand he is also an upright man (*zhengjing ren*) or philistine -- that side of him resents a modern girl like Rose.

His resentment is socially very symbolic. Out of a convenience that fits the modern speed of life, Zhenbao likes forth-right women, namely what I earlier called “public women” – the third kind of woman between “good women” and prostitutes. But these kinds of women are anarchic socially and/or sexually (Rose was “carefree with everyone”), they defy the philistine ideals of femininity and domestic virtues. Finally Zhenbao decides to abandon Rose.

¹²⁸Based on Kingsbury's translation (259), with some modification. Italics mine.

¹²⁹Based on Kingsbury's translation (260-261), with modification.

Rose's image is highly symbolic of a certain era, in which the category of "public women" was expanding faster than any other. Zhenbao's thought "such women might be normal in the West [implying not normal in China]" is actually not very knowing: in both China and the West women in Rose's image and behavior were the targets of controversy. According to Carolyn Dean, during the years between the First and Second World War, the distinction between 'good' and 'bad' women became increasingly blurred as "young, middle-class, single women cut their hair, donned comfortable clothes, drove, worked, had male companions, played sports, and earned names such as *garconne* and *flapper*. It was *as if all women had taken on the attributes of prostitutes or lesbians* [. . .]" (Dean 36-37, emphasis mine).

Between the two World Wars such women contributed to the much needed social liberation but at the same time the much feared social anarchy. They were variously called "New Women" (*xin nüxing*) – if one refers to the early feminists, with their emphasis on women's independence and social and professional equality with men, or "Modern Girls" (*modeng nüxing*) – if one has in mind the flapper and the ultramodern who functioned, as some critics put it, as an agent of mediation between mass market and modernist cultures.¹³⁰ In the West as well as in China they were a source of public controversy and catalysts for literary experiments – in the Chinese context one only needs to think of the female protagonists in Mao Dun's novels, in the novels of the so-called *haipai* writers

¹³⁰ See Ann Heilmann and Margaret Beetham *New Woman Hybridities: Femininity, Feminism and International Consumer Culture, 1880-1930* for a thorough account on the "new woman" as well as the "modern girl" phenomenon.

including those of the New Perceptionists who conjure the shock and aura they have injected onto the urban cultural landscape.¹³¹

Rose the college student and party girl, with her extremely short hair, sleeveless shirt and very short skirt is exactly modeled on the fashions of the “Modern Girl.” Her kind of carefree (*suibian*) behavior, which disconcerts Zhenbao more than anything else, foreshadows the socially and sexually promiscuous woman that she is to become. For middle-class, philistine urbanites, such women were a metaphor for social and sexual anarchy, who destabilized the boundaries between genders and classes through their carefree associations.

It is the “upright” side of Zhenbao that, deeply imprinted with the realistic, that is, philistine ideals of marriage, domesticity and gender roles, decides to abandon Rose the “Modern Girl.” But the subtle point is that the “Modern Girl” does have a certain “commodified femininity.”¹³² This side of her makes the parting difficult. Zhang writes, “Zhenbao slid his hand under her velvet coat and pulled her toward him. Behind her aching-cold diamonds, crinkly silver lace, hundreds of exquisite nuisances, her young body seemed to leap out of her clothes.”¹³³ But Zhenbao has already made up his mind: “Rose’s body leapt out of her clothes, leapt onto his *nüxing*) body, but he was his own master” (Kingsbury 261-262). In this, Zhenbao is consistent with the side of himself that has resented the sight of masculinity in the Parisian prostitute.

¹³¹ Among these writings, Xu Xiacun’s famous short story “Modern Girl” (1932) directly used the word “modern girl,” in English, for its title.

¹³²The phrase is used by Hilary Fawcett in her article “Romance, glamour and the exotic: femininity and fashion in Britain in the 1900s,” *New Woman Hybridities*, p145.

One needs to note that Zhanbao's "upright" world is not really made of feudal values – if that is the case he wouldn't have thought of Rose's carefree manner as "innocent." Rather it is made of a mixture of modern industrial puritan values plus the ideals of middle-class masculinity and domesticity, serving first of all the practical purpose of running a successful nuclear family and a successful professional career. In other words, for Zhenbao the middle-class urbanite, these values are not defended for their innate moral or social meanings, but predominantly for their *practicality*. Zhenbao finds Rose unsuitable to marry on the basis that "marrying her and transplanting her to his hometown – that would be a big waste of money, not a good deal at all" (Kingsbury 261).¹³⁴ Such are the amoral values of the philistine.

The compensation for such a rational and practically "wise" decision is immediately shown -- after breaking up with Rose, Zhenbao soon graduates with excellent marks and lands a coveted job in a British textiles company in Shanghai. However, this will not be the end of the story, for just as the philistine, puritan and rationally calculating person is the "true" Zhenbao, the one that likes quick women and craves for vital, sensuous sexual life is also his "true" self.

I.3. The skin-deep Other: domestication of the exotic and the promiscuous

¹³³The novella paints a very moving farewell scene in which both have cried and both find parting extremely hard. It is potentially a very touching melodrama if not for one major irony -- there is no villain or insurmountable obstacle to separate them, unlike the cases in May Fourth love stories.

¹³⁴The novella tells us that Zhenbao on one hand marvels over his ability to resist Rose's temptation and to do the "right" thing, and on the other hand "in his back" (that is, in the back of his "upright" self) he regrets the decision -- for the two have fallen in "love;" although it is a very superficial and fleeting kind, it is after all his first love.

The greatest sociological interest of this novella is that Zhenbao the quintessential philistine male is made to encounter, one after another, the popular types of modern women that the philistines are both covetous and afraid of. After the Parisian prostitute, the first major kind of “public” woman that Zhanbao, on behalf of all philistine males like him, has courted is a “modern girl.” As if that is not enough, the next kind of woman that Zhenbao is to encounter and is fatally attracted to is the worst of them all, and she appears in a middle-class *domestic* setting.

Zhenbao’s new sexual interest, Jiaorui, is a Singaporean young woman, married to an upper middle-class young man, a fellow college student from the British university that she has attended. She is hastily married because her reputation has been tainted by all her amorous encounters in college, and she is in danger of becoming discounted on the marriage market. After getting married she continues to be sexually promiscuous -- having affairs with her male tenants (one of them being Zhenbao) in a semi-open way, and in a carefree and “innocent” manner reminiscent of Rose.

If the word “innocent” can only be used ironically and paradoxically in such a context, Jiaorui’s character is of the same nature. Indeed, Zhenbao’s third woman is a paradox – she constitutes the ultimate attraction and repulsion to the masculine nerve, and the ultimate *frustration of any conventional conceptions of femininity*.

In some senses Jiaorui seems to meet certain male fantasies of femininity – fantasies that won’t be met by a hyperactive modern girl like Rose. She is like Molly in Joyce’s *Ulysses* -- indolent, unkempt and always in pajamas. In other words, she is totally unproductive. She is vain, knows little of everything else while being an expert in flirting with and seducing men – the only skill she has acquired from her college years in London.

Zhenbao finds her having combined “a mature woman’s beauty and a child’s mind” and thus “most irresistible.” In other words, she is “feminine” in the perverted sense that she represents *just the opposite of the puritan male role* – that is, being responsible for productivity in economic terms or for civility in social terms.

But in some other senses, Jiaorui is not feminine at all. She is nonchalant, audacious and constantly sends shock waves through the puritan masculine nerve. She attends the first family dinner with the two new, male tenants wearing only pajamas and a towel that wraps her wet, dripping hair. If her lack of etiquette astonishes even the Westernized Zhenbao, the way she converses in male guests’ presence is anything but conventional. When her husband jokes about her diet and wonders why her face is still chubby, she says “that’s the mutton I ate last year.” After the meal she takes her liquid calcium supplement in front of the male guests and says it is just like “drinking the wall.”¹³⁵

The combination of her man-like intelligence and audacity and the total frivolity to which they are put to use is charming, disarming and disorienting. Falling in love with such a woman will definitely further challenge Zhenbao’s ability to define femininity in clear terms.

As Carolyn J. Dean put it, “as the delineation between masculinity and femininity became ever more tenuous, femininity ceased to function as a stable referent against which masculinity could define itself” (40). It is no coincidence that two highly memorable male protagonists in the literature of the 1940s are Zhang Ailing’s Zhenbao and Qian Zhongshu’s Fang Hongjian: both are “confused” men in terms of values and tastes, both have gone through a series of “modern” women -- prostitute or prostitute-like sexually promiscuous woman, New Woman, problematic domestic woman – without finding out

how and where they should place themselves. The two works are quite alike in their concern with the issue of gender while Qian Zhongshu's treatment of the issue of sex and sexuality is far from being as focused and thorough as Zhang's novella was.¹³⁶

One feature of Jiaorui touched sensitive nerves in the readers of the 1940s. It is the fact that such a woman is a married woman. The most obvious difference between Jiaorui and Rose is that Jiaorui is married¹³⁷ and the whole narrative about her takes place in *domestic* space – not even once have her interactions with Zhenbao taken place in a public social occasion (say a college party or alumni gathering) or urban entertainment venue. *The irony between her utter “domesticity” and her lack of any domestic virtue* is then very striking.

That same irony, in different degrees, was at the center of many of the 1940s' most well-known literary works. One only needs to be reminded of Sun Roujia in Qian Zhongshu's *Besieged City* or the “I” in Su Qing's *Ten Years of Married Life* (1943), both depicting a “domestic” woman not wanting to or not being able to meet the expectations of domestic virtue, although one work is from the male and the other from the female point of view.

The persistence of the theme is no coincidence, for it was part and parcel of the ethos of the wartime era. In China and in the West, the Second World War put an end to the ultra modern and flamboyant spirit of the 1930s. The special wartime environment and atmosphere drove a lot of people into getting married. As Nicole Huang has pointed out,

¹³⁵Based on Kingsbury's translation (266-267) with modifications.

¹³⁶Some commentators on Shanghai literature and culture, like Xu Daoming, think sexuality is a household theme of *haipai* literature (318). In that light, Qian Zhongshu's *Besieged City* is obviously not *haipai* writing.

one dominant theme of the war-time Shanghai's cultural scene was domesticity. But it was a very different, unstable kind of "domesticity" compared to the traditional kind, having come *after* the long social and gender role emancipation and social and sexual anarchy since the late 1920s.

Thus one new enigma for the 1940s was what I call the "pseudo domestic" woman. Based on the facts that she is married and is committed to no feminist or public aspirations, these women could be called "domestic." But having been educated in the modern educational system, and having lived according to the liberal codes of an independent, free woman, she is either unable or rarely willing to let herself be confined by the middle-class male's expectations of femininity or domestic virtues. At the "low" end, she could be someone like Jiaorui who continues the pursuit of pleasure under the institutional protection of marriage. At the "high" end, she could be the "I" in Su Qing's *Ten Years of Married Life*, who maintains the intellectual and spiritual independence of an educated woman within the confines of everyday domesticity. Nothing captures this kind of domestic intellectualism better than Su Qing herself, who, after becoming a bestselling writer and magazine editor, proudly declared, "I often write about the affairs between men and women, because what I am familiar with is just this area."¹³⁸ But more common than either end is actually the grey zone -- the picture of modern marriage drawn by Qian Zhongshu in *Besieged City* or by "new urbanite" writers such as Yu Qie, in which an unfeminine woman alienates and is alienated by an unmanly man.

¹³⁷ Zhenbao himself recognizes the difference amidst the continuity. Upon seeing Jiaorui he thinks to himself: "he'd just put an end to his relationship with Rose, and here she was again, in anew body, with a new soul -- and another man's wife. But this woman went even further than Rose" (Kingsbury 269).

¹³⁸ Su Qing, "Performing opera on the New Year's Day" (*Yuandan yanju ji*), collected in *Suqing sanwen jingbian*, Zhejiang Wenyi Chubanshe, 1995.

No matter what end she belongs to, the “pseudo domestic” woman constitutes a subtler and at the same time a deeper disturbance to the middle-class nerve, *since the public versus the private woman, the promiscuous versus the domestic woman can hardly be distinguished now*. Because of such a mixture, the “pseudo domestic” woman is more attractive in a sense – who wouldn’t want a woman that is a wife and a lover at once? At least that’s what Zhenbao contemplates upon when he first feels attracted to Jiaorui:

And yet, when it came to this Wang Jiaorui, hadn’t Shihong done pretty well for himself by marrying her? Of course, Wang Shihong’s father had money; not unlike himself who had to forge ahead on his own, for whom such a woman would be a major impediment. Not to mention he wasn’t as easygoing as Wang Shihong, who would let his woman flout every rule. If you argue with her all day long, it’s no good either. That is sure to sap a man’s energy and drain him of ambition. Of course . . . she was like this precisely because her husband couldn’t control her; if Wang Shihong had managed to get a handle on her, she wouldn’t be quite so unruly. Zhenbao leaned on the railing, his arms folded. Down below, . . . Wide and quiet, the street stretched beyond him; . . . So many people in the world, but they won’t be coming home with you. When night fell and silence took over . . . there in the dark, you needed a wife you really loved, otherwise there would be nothing but loneliness. Zhenbao didn’t think this through clearly, but he was overwhelmed by a sense of foreboding.”¹³⁹

This is probably one of the most touching passages in modern Chinese literature that has ever been written on the modern middle-class male: how he longs for a home; how he wants to believe, and try to convince himself, that a “modern” woman like that could be his mate, since he sees that she is, after all, able to stay home. But at the same time, he is so concerned about his financial power, whether it is enough to “contain” her; he also holds dear his masculine temper (*xingzi*) and manly ambition (*nanren de zhiqi*), wondering if he will be able to tolerate a woman like that.

Because of the latter considerations, because of the further vices and deeds of Jiaorui that he comes to witness as a tenant, Zhenbao stays watchful and cautious of Jiaorui

for quite a long time, resisting her seductive moves with the best self-control that he knows, while he continues to converse with her with the same mixture of interest and contempt that the urbanite public grants to “pseudo-domestic” women.

But all this denial and delay only make the later eruption of his passion more heedless and disastrous. For just as he is a very strong character in his *social self*, he is also a strong character in his *private self*, whose drives are fundamentally *asocial*.¹⁴⁰

II

Under the Sign of *Eros*: Modern Selfhood and Topography of *Life*

While the Republican *xiaxie xiaoshuo* and the “new urbanite” literature are preoccupied with the social aspects of sex and sexuality, other modern schools of literature are interested in sex from a very different angle. The writers from these schools, no matter how different in individual choices of subjects and styles, can all be grouped under a discourse represented by the name of psychoanalysis or Freudianism (though not necessarily limited to the teachings and writings of Freud alone).

In this modern discourse sex has gone beyond being a reproductive or erotic activity. Sex was first made into a *human* issue – sexual satisfaction is seen as the key to human happiness and freedom. This is the central theme of the May Fourth “Novel of Love and Eros” (*aiyu xiaoshuo*). Then sex became entangled with *psychological* inquiries, deemed central to the understanding of the workings of the human psyche, especially that

¹³⁹Translation based on Kingsbury’s (269-270), with modifications.

¹⁴⁰The phrase “asocial” is inspired by Raymond Williams’ term “antisocial,” used to describe the Freudian self: “Freudian theory assumes a basic division between the individual and society, . . . Man, the ‘bare human being’, has certain fundamental drives which are also fundamentally anti-social.” (Williams 1961,78).

of the Unconscious or Id, conceived by Freud as the storehouse of instinctual desires, needs, and psychic actions. This line of concern ran through the writings of widely different writers from the Creation School writer Yu Dafu to the New Perceptionist Shi Zhecun. Ultimately sex even became an *existential* issue when sexuality, in the name of Eros or libido, was seen as the measure of livelihood of an individual, or even the vitality of a civilization – for this Shen Congwen was the best spokesperson.¹⁴¹ All three levels corresponded to Freud’s writings at different stages of his long life.¹⁴²

Like the discovery of the “individual,” the celebration of sexuality as such and the emphasis on the unconscious sexual drive (variously called libido, or Id, or Eros) seemed to promise progressive potential – like the celebration of individualism, it implies a refusal and rebellion against all forms of repressions.¹⁴³ But the problems were also obvious: to start with, the sexual instincts within an individual might be at odds with the other instincts within the same person; the failure of a resolution and harmony between the parts leads to the impossibility of a *unified individual* to take on human or moral agency – thus the suspicion of whether all this promises any real human liberation at all.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴¹Sun Naixiu’s study of Freudianism in modern Chinese literature has a very thorough chapter on Shen Congwen.

¹⁴²The best account of Freud as a philosopher is Jonathan Lear’s *Freud* (Routledge 2005) offering a very clear and thorough introduction to Freud’s thought, organizing it into three stages: at the first stage, Freud found that the study of psychology led him to sex and sexuality, or the so-called unconscious. At the second stage, Freud defines sex as Eros and looks at how sexuality is relevant to the project of healthy human development.. At the third stage, The personal development model is extended to the development of culture and civilization, where he considers morality and religion suppressive to the vitality of a society by suppressing vital sexual instincts in the members of that society.

¹⁴³D. H. Lawrence made a link between the issue of individualism and the issue of sexuality through his concept of “sexual individualism.” Lawrence once wrote to his friend discussing “the idea of establishing a colony in Mexico to be run on psychoanalytic principles – a sort of utopia devoted to *sexual individualism*.” Quoted in Lindsay Stonebridge “Psychoanalysis and literature” from *The Cambridge History of 20th Century English Literature*, 273

¹⁴⁴Freud conceived the id-ego-superego mental apparatus, trying to give a “structure” to the parts, but how exactly does this tri-partied struggle work is another issue.

Just as the rise of individualism generates countless debates about the relationship between society and the individual, the modern discovery of sexuality as such generates legions of works about the struggles between man the *sexual* creature and man the *social* or moral creature. Entangled in the struggles within different parts or aspects of the self and unable to reach a resolution, the barely unified individuals or “anti-heroes” became the new heroes, peopling the pages of the most widely read post-May Fourth writers from Yu Dafu and Zhang Ziping to Ding Ling. Zhang Ailing’s *Zhenbao* is another notable entry to this long lineage of “anti-heroes.” But *Zhenbao*, carrying distinct philistine characteristics (as opposed to those of the bohemian and petty intellectual) and living a very social existence (as opposed to the state of social exile or isolation), gives the struggle between the sexual man and the social/moral man *new intensity* and *new content*.

The intensity with which sexual passion onslaughts average and ordinary urban individuals (as it does Weilong “the extremely ordinary Shanghai school girl” and *Zhenbao* “the most ideal modern Chinese man”), as depicted in Zhang’s most well-known novellas, is nothing that has ever been seen in the history of modern Chinese literature. The sheer repetitiveness in *Zhenbao*’s experiences – falling in love with one after another “public” women, and abandoning them again and again – shows that the conflict and split between the socially and morally reliable, middle-class man and the immoral, amoral, vital “sexual” man has no sign of reaching a resolution. Toward the end of the novella, the readers are told that such destructive cycles will continue to repeat themselves. In other words, in *Zhenbao*’s case, the consistent character presupposed by the liberal individualists virtually no longer exists and shows no sign of coming into being.

To some, the disappearance of the accountable individual or personality is a blow to liberal humanism, the latter presupposing a unified personality to be the agency of moral choice and individual freedom. But for some, in it lies a new kind of human project. D. H. Lawrence, one of Zhang's favorite authors, is a literary Freudianist who embraced the "loss" as "gain":

...Non-human, in humanity, is more interesting to me than the old-fashioned human element – which causes one to conceive a character in a certain moral scheme and make him consistent. ...You mustn't look in my novel for the old stable *ego* of the character. There is another *ego*, according to whose action the individual is unrecognizable, ..." (italics in the original)¹⁴⁵

This other "ego" is the sexual ego, which in the modern sexual discourse has acquired an autonomous life of its own. By becoming disentangled from the other aspects of the personality, it has taken on an unprecedented force.

Although having never explicitly championed the so-called "non-human in humanity" so unequivocally as Lawrence did, Zhang, quoting Lawrence as a major influence on her writing, did in her major novellas give the impersonal, autonomous sexual "ego" vital and disturbing depictions. In her major novellas – *The First Brazier* (1943.5), *Golden Cangue* (1943.11) and *Red Rose White Rose* (1944.5), among others -- the "non-human" instinctive sexual passion is depicted as having a fatal power.

In *The First Brazier*, the ending seems to imply that Weilong's marriage to the playboy Qiao Qiqiao is a kind of moral and social "fall." But, given the astonishing intensity, and thus *inevitability*, with which Weilong's sexual passion takes control of her, it is unlikely that Zhang wants us to believe that there could have been a different ending.

¹⁴⁵D.H. Lawrence, letter of June 5, 1914, quoted in Whitworth (29).

At the beginning of the novella the readers are given the very recognizable Weilong character -- “an extremely ordinary school girl.” By the end of the novella readers on one hand know her more intimately, on the other hand they no longer know who she exactly is – no more than she herself knows. In other words, Zhang has portrayed *a modern self that is not capable of complete self-knowledge or self-control* -- for better or worse.

As Lyndsey Stonebridge observes, “a paradox” lies “at the heart of both psychoanalysis and literary Modernism,” because “the self that both return to endlessly in this endeavor is *not, as it were, in full possession of itself, but is rather characterized by a recognition of the limits of its own self knowledge.*” And she concludes that “[w]hat the Modernist poet and the free-associating patient both do, . . ., is inject something irreducibly enigmatic into the culture, something no one quite knows what to do with” (269, emphasis mine).

II. 1. Under the sign of Eros – messy selves, vital being

A modern “self” as such is indeed much messier and more unrecognizable than the traditional “individual.” But more than enough reasons could be found for the modernists to be profoundly interested in it. In Zhang’s works, a populist philistine surface thinly disguises the author’s humanist sympathy for the invigorating effect of the unconscious sexual drive and the messy modern selfhood -- *especially if she has to choose between this mess and the “clean” but impoverished self produced by modern, technocrat civilization.*

Through most parts of the novella *Red Rose White Rose*, Zhang’s narrative voice, like Zhenbao’s split personality, is *ironic* -- suspended between two opposite stands and

viewpoints, between the “social” and the “asocial,” or the hedonist and the moralist poles. For example Zhang portrays Zhenbao in the following manner after he has finally started an adulterous affair with Jiaorui: “After that, he came straight home after work, sitting on the top of a double-decker bus and facing the setting sun, the windowpane a sheet of light as the bus roared toward the sun, toward his happiness, *his shameful happiness*” (Kingsbury 281, emphasis mine).

Throughout the passage, Zhang’s very empathetic depiction of Zhenbao’s inner joy almost leads the reader to sympathize with Zhenbao the sinner, whereas the last, add-on note “his shameless happiness” gives the passage a jarring double consciousness. This device is used consistently – Zhang’s narrative voice seems to approximate Zhenbao’s own split worldview and personality, without any partiality on the part of the narrator.

The double consciousness is abandoned, however, when the novella comes to depict the White Rose, Zhanbao’s legitimate wife after he abandons Jiaorui. The ironic stance as discussed above disappears almost completely, and the narrative voice almost changes to a cold objectivity, void of the kind of empathy accorded to Zhenbao or Jiaorui. Here is how Yan Li -- that’s her name -- is introduced to the reader:

The young lady was twenty-two years old and would soon be graduating from college. Her college wasn’t a very good one, just the best she could get into, but Yanli was a good student in a mediocre place; she studied hard and didn’t associate much with her classmates. Her whiteness, like a portable hospital screen, separated her from the bad things in her environment. It also separated her from the things in her books. For ten years now Yanli had gone to school, diligently looking up new words, memorizing charts, copying everything from the blackboard, between her and which there seemed, however, to be a white membrane (Kingsbury 294).

Although portrayed with no intimacy or empathy, the Yan Li character is crucial, for she is the other half of the symbolic double called “Red Rose White Rose.” So it is

important to find out what does she stand for vis-à-vis the other two characters in the novella.

A good starting point is the symbolism in the colors – the most explicit clue given by the author in regard to the thematic mapping of the characters. What characterizes Yan Li is the “white” color – “white skin,” “white screen used in the hospital,” “white membrane”; and all of them serve to separate her, cut her off (*ge*) from whatever she should be in touch with.

Here is a further portrayal of Yan Li after she is married:

Yanli began to suffer from constipation. She sat in the bathroom for several hours each day. That was the only time when she was entitled to do nothing, say nothing, think nothing. The rest of the time she also said nothing and thought nothing, but she always felt a little uneasy about it. Only in the white bathroom could she settle down and feel rooted.¹⁴⁶

What develops out of the Yan Li character is a kind of physical and mental impoverishment or even living death. The same white color motif persists into her married life, and by now its symbolic meaning is clearer: if this person is good and accountable, that is, whitewashed of all things bad, she is also whitewashed of *life*.

In contrast, the Jiaorui character is always associated with color – excessive colors, even colorful “mess.” Here is a description of how Jiaorui looks during the first private encounter between her and her tenant Zhenbao:

... She was wearing a long dress that trailed on the floor, a dress of such intense, fresh, and wet green that anything it touched turned the same color. When she moved a little, the air was streaked with green. The dress had been cut a bit too small, it seemed: the seams along the side were split open an inch and a half, then laced together, in a crisscross pattern, over a green satin strip, revealing the deep pink skirt underneath. Looked at too long, those eye-popping colors would prove blinding. Only she could wear a dress like that with such utter insouciance.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁶Based on Kingsbury’s translation (304), with minor modifications.

¹⁴⁷Based on Kingsbury’s translation (271), with modifications.

Able to quote Gauguin, Van Gogh, Matisse and Picasso in one breath, Zhang is obviously well versed in the cultural and artistic aspirations of the primitivist movement in modern art. Obviously she has planted the primitivism's color code in Jiaorui to make her visually and culturally shocking -- and refreshing for that reason -- like the figures in primitivist paintings.

The outward features of Jiaorui – her golden brown skin, her muscular plumpness (“every inch of it is lively”), the vivacious colors of her dress (“blinding” “glaring” mixture of “the most piquant, damp green” with “dark pink”) -- all these constitute a glaring contrast with Yan Li's blank, impoverished whiteness.

Now the symbolic mapping is complete: just as the vibrant and glaring colors favored by the primitivist movement represents the libido, the “id” as defined by psychoanalysis and the unrestrained sexuality associated with the primitive tribes, Jiaorui, with the same color symbolisms and physique, is made to represent *uninhibited sexuality and vitality*. She stands exactly opposite to Yan Li, who represents sexual inertness and waning vitality brought about by modern mechanical civilization, against which the primitivism movement sets out to rebel.¹⁴⁸

What is significant and interesting in such a symbolic mapping is: first, a connection is drawn between sexual vigor and the *overall* wellbeing and vitality of a person; second, “vitality” is made into *a value in itself*, disregarding the social or moral

¹⁴⁸In Japanese occupied Shanghai, another bestselling author Wu Mingshi also published works that displayed the influence of primitivism (*North Pole Landscape*, *Tali Women*, 1943). The protagonist of his giant volume *Wumingshi Manuscript* (*wumingshi shuguo*) Yindi is someone who is primitive and vital in both body and mind. And he searches through experiences in love, revolution and even underground gang to find something deeper and more vital than life itself. But what Wu Mingshi represents is rather a romanticized version of the primitive, not unlike the Romanticist' idealization of the noble savage; whereas Zhang and the modernist primitivism celebrate primitive sexuality and vitality with or despite of all its vices.

implications of it. In other words, the Red Rose versus White Rose contrast is about “living” versus “dead” person – the question of “good” or “bad” (person) is irrelevant.

It is through the above named link between sexual vigor and the vitality of one’s whole being that *existential* philosophies could be developed around the notion of libido (free creative, or psychic, energy that an individual needs for personal development or individuation), or the notion of Eros (a basic human drive for life, love and development, as opposed to the death drive) – both referring primarily to sexual and erotic energy in human beings.

One of the most radical versions of such philosophies is developed by D.H. Lawrence, who identifies what he calls “blood consciousness” as the true site of one’s being. In one of his letters in 1915 Lawrence declares:

Now I am convinced of what I believed when I was about twenty – that there is another seat of consciousness than the brain and the nervous system. . . . There is the blood-consciousness, *with the sexual connection*, holding the same relation as the eye, in seeing, holds to the mental consciousness. *One lives, knows, and has one’s being in the blood*, without any reference to nerves and brain.”¹⁴⁹

Although having never sounded so programmatic as Lawrence, Zhang does share a similar vision. This vision is hinted at here and there in her essays and made clear in her major works, where she readily assigns sexually repressed people such as Yan Li an impoverishment in their being.

In the first section of this chapter I said that *Red Rose White Rose* could be read as Zhenbao’s *sexual* history. In the context of this section, I am ready to say it is at the same

¹⁴⁹Lawrence’s letter to Bertrand Russell in December 1915, quoted in Jeremy MacClancy. “Anthropology: The Latest Form of Evening Entertainment” in David Bradshaw ed. *A Concise Companion to Modernism*, Blackwell, 2003, p83, emphasis mine.

time Zhenbao's *existential* history. The impoverishment that Zhenbao suffers after he abandons Jiaorui and marries Yan Li is not really a sexual one – for the readers are told that he goes to brothel every three weeks to have his sexual needs met. What besets him is rather an existential impoverishment. We are told that “he was still busy-busy, but gradually he succumbed to fatigue. Even the smiling wrinkles of his suit looked tired” (Kingsbury 297).

In the above quoted passage (see page 34), Lawrence not only connects the so-called “blood consciousness through the sexual connection” to the state of one’s “being,” he also connects it to the state of one’s overall mental consciousness. There is actually a term that refers to the “mental consciousness,” or the totality of consciousness reflecting the condition of the nerves and the brain, including what Lawrence calls “the blood consciousness.” It is what C. G. Jung, Freud’s disaffected student, calls “psyche.” Jung works to differentiate the post-Freudian “psyche” from the old-fashioned notion of “soul”: “By psyche, I understand the totality of all psychic processes, *conscious as well as unconscious*. By soul, on the other hand, I understand a clearly demarcated functional complex that can best be described as a ‘personality’”(emphasis mine).¹⁵⁰

In Zhang Ailing’s works there are plenty of instances in which she connects the condition of the “psyche,” defined by Jung as one’s total mental consciousness (Zhang has mentioned Jung in her essay), to sexually informed life instincts.

In *Red Rose White Rose*, right after the comment on the married Zhenbao, who is “tired” from within, the novella moves swiftly to the description of Zhenbao’s highly

¹⁵⁰ Jung, C.G. (1971). *Psychological Types*, Collected Works, Volume 6, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, Def. 48, par. 797.

unexpected encounter with an older and emanciated Jiaorui – a fleeting encounter aboard a public bus, without any physical contact involved. The wonders that this encounter does to Zhenbao’s mental state, or psyche, is striking: on that day the same home that he returns to every day suddenly seems more real, more present and lively, as if his consciousness is suddenly more awake. It is as if he is seeing his home for the first time – for the narrator, identifying with Zhenbao’s point of view, for the first time describes Zhenbao’s home to the readers:

... It was Saturday, so they had the afternoon off. He went home at half past twelve. He had a small Western-style alley house, facing the street. A long row of houses, all looking the same: gray cement walls, like smooth and shiny coffin boards, with flowering oleanders sticking up over the top. The courtyard inside was small, but it counted as a garden. Everything that a home should have, his had. Small white clouds floated in the blue sky above, and on the street a flute vendor was playing the flute ... (Kingsbury 299-300).

What is noteworthy here is that Zhenbao’s personality (soul) has hardly changed – the narrator, speaking in the voice of his personality, still sounds very philistine when it says “everything that a home should have, his had.” But his mental consciousness, or psyche, has undergone a transformation – he enters into a state of heightened sense perception and intensified awareness of the environment and himself.

What is profound is that the change has *not* come through direct sexual contact with the other person, nor through the desire toward her -- since Jiaorui is hardly her old self and hardly exerts any erotic aura at that encounter. The change is rather due to Zhenbao’s being back in touch with *his own* life instincts by way of Jiaorui, to whom his sexual and life instincts were once connected.

With the introduction of the *psyche* to replace the old-fashioned “personality,” the modern conception of the self is to include the conscious as well as the unconscious aspects

of one's being. And for that reason parts of this self are to remain opaque to the very individual that lives it. Such a self may be unrecognizable or unpredictable, lacking the stability and coherence of the traditional personality. But with that "loss" comes a gain as well: this self better registers one's vital life instincts, closely connected to one's sexual instincts, or what Lawrence calls "blood consciousness"; it is a newly extended, *if more precarious*, framework by which one understands and measures the nature and quality of human existence.

I used the word "precarious" because I am aware that the modernist vision and imagination of selfhood are very much about journey and danger – to follow the lead of one's instincts might mean leaving the territory that one is familiar with. The result is either no return to the familiar; or when one returns, nothing is ever the same again.

II. 2. The "other" within and without: when psychoanalysis meets anthropology

" . . . the innermost core or the outermost boundary – in any description of the modernist temper these two moments must figure prominently" (Levenson 9).

"The anthropologist travels to the farthest point of navigation only to discover home truths that the psyche had not recognized for itself. The psychoanalyst presses to the deepest reaches of the self only to find the stranger whom the anthropologist is seeking abroad" (Levenson 11).

In the last section I have laid out the symbolic mapping of the three main *characters* in *Red Rose White Rose*. In this section I will focus more on the major *event* of the novella – the development of the illicit affair between Zhenbao and Jiaorui, and the

most important interpersonal relationship in the novella – the relationship between Zhenbao and Jiaorui.

Taking away all the sensational elements of the plot that would satisfy Zhang's urbanite readers – adultery and illicit affair, the fall and destruction of a “decent” young man, erotic relationship turned into love relationship -- the most important, and truly unique, aspect of Zhenbao's affair with Jiaorui is this: there is a strong sense that Zhenbao's affair with such a woman is *inevitable*, a fact that is so clear to the readers but only unknown to and refusing to be acknowledged by the protagonist himself.

The readers find Zhenbao's union with Jiaorui “inevitable” because the novella recounts Zhenbao's relationships with four, not just one, women, and in the process a “logic” or “consistency” emerges regarding Zhenbao's erotic propensities. It becomes apparent to the readers that something in Zhenbao's own essence draws him to women like Jiaorui. It is then with great dramatic irony that the readers watch Zhenbao identifying Jiaorui as strange and dangerous and making heroic efforts to resist her, while he heads, almost fatally and inevitably, toward a union with her.

In other words, the true “story” of the central plot of *Red Rose White Rose* is *Zhenbao's struggle with an “other” out there, which is actually an unacknowledged “other” inside himself.*

Such a “story” has not often been told. In the history of modern Chinese literature, there have been memorable stories about the struggles between the split and torn selves – readers have known and welcomed the stories of inconsistent selves from writers like Yu Dafu and the early Ding Ling. There have also been memorable stories about the exotic and

the foreign – Shen Congwen’s exotic West Hunan tales¹⁵¹ and the New Perceptionists’ ventures into the urban jungle are two manifestations, although in opposite directions. But never before have these two narrative and discursive traditions been fused into one – that is, *a journey toward the exotic “other” is simultaneously a journey into the dark, unconscious depth of one’s own self.*

On the philosophical level, Zhang’s combination and fusion of the two is actually very logical. It has its basis in the long existing link between psychoanalysis and anthropology – two modern disciplines that flourished during roughly the same period, under the same sign of primitivism.

The Id, used by Freud to refer to the part of the psyche that contains repressed, wishful and aggressive impulses, is described as follows:

It is the dark, inaccessible part of our personality; what little we know of it we have learnt from our study of dream-work and of the construction of neurotic symptoms, and most of that is of a negative character and can be described only as a contrast to ego. We approach the id with analogies: we call it a chaos, a cauldron full of seething excitations ... It is filled with energy reaching it from the instincts, but it has no organization, produces no collective will, but only a striving to bring about the satisfaction of instinctive needs subject to the observance of the pleasure principle (Freud 73).

Notice how much this id, by being associated with “dark[ness],” “chaos” and “energy,” sounds like -- we have to resort to analogy as Freud did – savage or primitive states of existence. And to get to know these was exactly the interest of the anthropologists.

Anthropology became popular science because many thought that its inquiries were relevant to the civilized world – exactly through the connection that psychoanalysis,

¹⁵¹ See Jeffrey Kinkley’s translation *Imperfect Paradise: Stories by Shen Congwen* (1995) for a good collection in English.

among others, established between the savage out there and the “savage” inside the civilized man. Indeed, as the protagonist of Aldous Huxley’s *Eyeless in Giza* (1936) put it: “Savage societies are simply civilized societies with the lid off. We can learn to understand them fairly easily. And when we’ve learnt to understand savages, we’ve learnt, as we discover, to understand the civilized.”¹⁵² This logic is formulated brilliantly by Levenson, who observes that “the anthropologist travels to the farthest point of navigation only to discover home truths that the psyche had not recognized for itself. The psychoanalyst presses to the deepest reaches of the self only to find the stranger whom the anthropologist is seeking abroad” (Levenson 11).

Freud’s own *Totem and Taboo: Resemblances between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics* (1912) made explicit connection between savages and the neurotics in the civilized world, and attempted to apply psychoanalysis to the field of anthropology, archeology and religion. While Freud meant it to be another scientific study, like the one he meant with the study of the human psyche, the use that other people made of it was beyond the scientific. The modernist writers, many of them well versed in the development of both psychoanalysis and anthropology, extolled a complex primitivism, in which “...the innermost core” (the quest of the psychoanalyst) and “the outermost boundary” (the quest of the anthropologist) reign prominently (Levenson 9).

The modernist primitivism as such is enigmatic and unsettling. It is not just primitivist costumes or colors that they dealt with – as in the case of visual artists like Gauguin or Matisse; rather, for anthropologists or modernist writers like Joseph Conrad, primitivism as such involved venturing into real uncharted places (physically and

¹⁵² Huxley, *Eyeless in Giza*, quoted in Jeremy MacClancy “Anthropology: ‘The latest form of evening entertainment,’” *A Concise Companion to Modernism*, p75.

mentally), courting real dangers and real chances to be swept and devoured by the dark forces one was after.

In the essay “Wordsworth in the Tropics,” Huxley, another of Zhang’s favorite authors, made a contrast between the serene and elegiac nature known to the romantics like Wordsworth and the much darker nature known to the modernists – the latter, Huxley maintained, knew what nature “really” was about.

The modernist generation had a different experience of untamed nature or primitive cultures. The age of the modernists is the first age when travels and journeys to the remote corners of the Earth were no longer an exclusive game for adventurous sailors or daredevils, but for men of letters (anthropologists, archeologists, travel writers) as well. For the first time, the remote corners of the earth were registered by the civilized man’s tender psyche.¹⁵³ The generation of Europeans between the late 19th and early 20th century was to register in their being the equatorial traveler’s experience of tropical forests or African deserts, of a nature that was to Huxley’s perception “foreign, appalling, fundamentally and utterly inimical to intruding man” (Thomas, 577).¹⁵⁴ In short, the modernist’s nature was not the subjugated one on the European continent waiting to be romanticized by poets like Wordsworth.

In a similar manner, in Zhang’s novella *The First Brazier* travel and prolonged intimation of the tropical atmosphere is registered with a sensitivity and acuteness only belonging to the truly civilized. Never before in the history of Chinese literature is the *deep*

¹⁵³For the background of these intersecting developments see Nicholas Thomas, *Colonialism’s Culture: Anthropology, Travel, Government* (Princeton Uni. Press, 1994).

¹⁵⁴Huxley admits that “there is something ... rather stimulating and exciting” in the encounter with such a nature: “Taken in reasonably small doses, the Sahara exhilarates, like alcohol.” But ultimately an uneasy feeling “that he is an alien in the midst of an innumerable throng of hostile beings” oppresses the lonely traveler. Huxley wryly remarks that “it is easy to love a feeble and already conquered enemy,” whereas for

connection between dark, unknown nature and the dark, unknown human psyche so thoroughly portrayed. Nature in that novella is definitely not romanticized, but is portrayed as an impenetrable and inarticulate presence, powerful and at the same time alien to the human psyche. Here is how the “natural” environment of Hong Kong is described after Weilong has had her first encounter with evil lust:

. . . There was an outcrop opposite the balcony – as if the mountain had reached out its tongue to give the balcony a lick. During plum-rain season, drunken trees on the mountain were steeped in mist; the scent of green leaves was everywhere. Plantains, Cape jasmine, magnolia, banana trees, camphor trees, sweet flag, ferns, ivorywoods, palms, reeds, and tobacco, all growing too fast and spreading too rapidly: *it was ominous, with a whiff of something like blood in the air*. The humidity was *oppressive*, and the walls and furniture were slick with moisture.”¹⁵⁵

It is in such an atmosphere, in the proximity to such an intoxicating but at the same time “ominous” nature that Weilong contemplates, for the first time, the evil intentions reserved for her by her aunt and her cronies, and her own complicity with it to an irreversible point. The original word is that Weilong has grown too “addicted” – as if against her will – to that world to leave it.

Such a setting of nature, like the above-described vast masses of swarming vegetation in its impenetrable menace, bears witness to the force of id surging in Weilong’s own psyche at that moment. It is an id described by Freud as “the dark, inaccessible part of our personality; a chaos, a cauldron full of seething excitations . . . filled with energy, but . . . has no organization.” The mutual recognition between the two is almost inimitable.

the “unconquered, unconquerable, ceaselessly active enemy” one rather holds a “salutary fear” (quoted in Thomas, 577).

¹⁵⁵Based on Kingsbury’s translation (51), with modification, emphasis mine.

Out of Zhang's novellas, two -- *The First Brazier* and *Red Rose White Rose* -- are about the above described encounter between the "other" out there and the "other" within. The difference is: in *The First Brazier* the "other" out there is the "ominous" tropical nature, in *Red Rose White Rose* the "other" out there is an urban woman who lives in an urban environment, who however exhumes a tropical wildness in her physical presence. Indeed, if *The First Brazier* features Conradian encounters with the primitive, that is, through real experience of travel and dislocation, *Red Rose White Rose* seems to be adopting Lawrence's strategy -- in Lawrence's representative works such as *Rainbow* he is good at evoking the primitive in the *everyday domestic* setting.

Zhenbao's encounter with Jiaorui involves a wakening of the primitive instincts in Zhenbao's being, but it happens in an utterly domestic setting. Earlier I discussed how the outward features of Jiaorui -- her golden brown skin, her muscular plumpness, the vicarious color of her clothing -- resemble those of Gauguin's Tahitian women or Matisse's Fauvist women figures. But there is also something else that connects Jiaorui to the tropical nature -- something more elusive and enigmatic than the mere shock of the appearance.

Like the modern atmospheric writers such as Henry James and D. H. Lawrence, Zhang is able to invest a simple domestic scene with ritualistic significance and a highly suggestive aura. Here is a scene that takes place after Zhenbao's efforts to "hide" from Jiaorui:

But one night the phone rang for a long time, and no one picked up. Zhenbao had just run out of his room to get it when he thought he heard Jiaorui's door opening. Afraid of running into her in the dark hallway, he beat a retreat. Jiaorui was groping around in the dark, seemingly unable to find the phone, and since Zhenbao was right by the light switch, he turned it on. He was stunned when he saw Jiaorui in the light. Probably just out of bath, she was wearing pajamas made out of a sarong fabric often worn by overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia [*nanyang*]. *The pattern on the fabric*

*was so heavy and dark that he couldn't tell whether it was snakes and dragons, or grasses or trees, the lines and vines all tangled up together, black and gold flecked with orange and green, deepening the night in the house. In the dim lamp light, the hallway felt like a train car, traveling from one foreign land to another. On the train you meet a woman quite by accident, but the woman feels genial.*¹⁵⁶

In this passage, the intense tropical aura of the scene is brought about by Zhang's secret technique of extending the description of the prints of Jiaorui's pajamas into a description of a certain kind of *landscape*; and only with that kind of extension can clothes "deepen the night." With such an imaginative extension, Zhang was able to imbue a domestic scene with the same sense of dangerous excitement and exotic intoxication that could be entailed in, say, Maugham's journey to the South Pacific. Repeatedly, Zhang uses such suggestive techniques to make Jiaorui more than just a person, but a kind of *creature* that *carries with it the atmosphere of its remote, original abode* – here it is supposed to be the tropical Nanyang.¹⁵⁷

Having said that, there remains another important question: who is making this imaginative extension? The answer is Zhenbao the protagonist, for the above scene is describing what *he* sees with great surprise and how *he* feels upon seeing it. With this realization one can say that the other great enigma, above the one associated with Jiaorui, is Zhenbao's *own* unconscious imagination – a realm of his consciousness not accessible to his waking thoughts (thus not spelled out by the narrator who articulates Zhenbao's inner

¹⁵⁶Based on Kingsbury's translation (277), with modification, emphasis mine.

¹⁵⁷ *Nanyang*, literally meaning "Southern Ocean," is the Chinese name used since the Ming and Qing dynasty for the geographical region south of China, in particular Southeast Asia. Other related words include *Xiyang* (Western Ocean), referring to the Western world, and *Dongyang* (Eastern Ocean), referring to Japan. The word is often used in reference to the ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia (*nanyang huaqiao*). Jiaorui's case is a little atypical in that, although she still considers herself Chinese – writing Chinese and married to an ethnic Chinese man – her racial make-up rather suggests hybridity, probably as the result of intermarriage between the ethnic Chinese and other races in the region.

voice), but *obliquely revealed* in the associations that he has attached onto his object of desire.

A note is needed here for the word unconscious and the words “unconscious imagination.” A very vulgar, misleading understanding of Freud’s unconscious is that, since it is so closely connected to sexuality and sexual drives, it could be considered the part of our mental world that is closest to animal instincts.¹⁵⁸ But Freud, as early as 1905, in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* maintains that sexual drive in humans differs from animal instincts in important ways due to an *inextricable entanglement of sexuality and imagination*. The reason that Freud translates something to do with sexuality into an item in our mental structure or the structure of human psyche is based on the fact that unlike other animals, human sexuality is *essentially* imaginative. In other words, the “unconscious” or the “id” is about sexual *instincts*, which are not necessarily, and crucially very often not, just the material sex.

It is through this connection to the imagination that the Unconscious, even in Freud’s own work, goes through several stages of redefinition and to one point made to register the effect of all human experiences – real or imaginative, personal or cultural.¹⁵⁹

It is in tune with the above quoted spirit of psychoanalysis when one observes that the enigma of the creaturely Jiaorui is the effect of *both* real physical attributes *and* the workings of Zhenbao’s unconscious imagination. Interpreted this way, the sensually and

¹⁵⁸ Among the Chinese Freudianists, Zhang Ziping for example once declared: “In the current scientific age, human beings and cats and mice are all [considered] animals. The human life observed from the perspective of Naturalism is a life of flesh (*rou de shenghuo*). To put it in extreme terms, it is no different from the life of the animals. The sexual writing [as practiced by himself] is exactly based on this.” Zhang Ziping, “A brief history of literature and art” (*Wenyi shi gaiyao*), quoted in Sun (85).

¹⁵⁹ According to Perry Meisel, “Freud’s work contains three distinct notions of the unconscious, each a function of the three principal stages through which psychoanalysis passes in its conceptual development, and each an overturning of the one before it.” See Meisel’s entry “Psychology” in *A Companion to Modernist Literature and Culture*, for a more detailed account on the three periods.

imaginatively suggestive scene between Zhenbao and Jiaorui are *both about the exotic creature, the “other out there,” as well as Zhenbao’s unconscious and its imagination -- “the other within.”* The latter somehow has an unacknowledged wanderlust (“traveling from one foreign land to another”) and an unreflective instinctual affinity with the exotic tropical places. Through sheer imaginations, sexually charged imaginations, something so banal as a piece of fabric worn by Jiaorui and a setting so commonplace as the hallway of an apartment are turned into the site of psychically jolting encounter with the dark and enticing “other,” no less exciting than the real ones that take place, say, in the Conradian jungles. And this encounter somehow feels “homecoming” (“On the train you meet a woman quite by accident, but the woman feels genial.”): indeed it is about coming “home” to Zhenbao’s own deep self, which is so far driven to exile by his rational self.

This reading of *Red Rose White Rose* and earlier of *The First Brazier*, links Zhang to a handful of modernists such as Joseph Conrad and D. H. Lawrence, who join the cultural forces and creative promises of the two important modern disciplines -- psychoanalysis and anthropology -- to explore the resonance between the dark continents in the human psyche and imagination and the dark continents in the remote corners of the globe we live in.

Having unraveled the modernist themes in Zhang’s novella, I need to point out, however, some important differences between Zhang’s works and those of her beloved Anglo-phone modernist writers. To begin with, Zhang’s heroes are not the kind of heroes like Conrad’s Kurtz; they are not even like Lawrence’s characters who could utter a declaration such as “my sex is deep and sacred, deeper than I am, . . . It saves me from

cheapness [...].”¹⁶⁰ Zhang’s characters are not members of the articulate bourgeoisie like Kurtz, Lady Chatterley or the just quoted Lou. They are much less self-conscious about who they are or what they are doing. Rather than “discovering” truths about themselves, they stumble upon them – having not consciously set out to find them beforehand, and not necessarily acknowledging them afterward.

One can say that, although displaying very deep affinity with the Western modernists in her vision of the primitive, Zhang’s work still operates within the mental world of her Chinese urbanites. Living up to her own observation that the average Chinese is “not interested in the origins or destinations of life”, who believe that “it is dangerous for one’s thoughts to wander too often beyond commonsense humanity” (“The Religion of the Chinese” 1944), Zhang almost always lets her characters come back to the realm of the commonsensical and the mundane even after their most intense experiences of the “nonhuman” in themselves or in the environment. She tends to portray the characters and settings that represent the primitive as morally suspicious (such as the Jiaorui character, or Mrs. Liang’s mansion in the mountains of Hong Kong), thus making the involvement with them disastrous rather than miraculous, and more or less a nightmarish “non-reality” rather than an acknowledged “reality.”

Rarely does Zhang allow her characters a chance to meet the split self squarely and face to face: Zhenbao slips into a feverish breakdown upon hearing Jiaorui’s action of divorcing her husband in order to marry him, and “resolves” the fate-turning issue of his life in a semi-conscious state. Weilong in *The First Brazier* comes to the opposite decision in the same manner – she gives in to the idea of marrying the playboy Qiao Qiqiao and

¹⁶⁰An utterance made by the character Lou in “St. Mawr,” *St. Mawr and Other Stories*, D. H. Lawrence, Volume 2 of the Cambridge Edition of the Works of D. H. Lawrence, Cambridge University Press, 1983.

staying in Hong Kong after her volition to escape is weaned away by a weakening fever and illness.

It is probably safe to say that Zhang is an *ironically tested realist* rather than an idealist, in comparison to her modernist counterparts such as Conrad and Lawrence. Being “ironically tested [realist],” she does not just mirror human “reality” as it is readily interpreted through conventional frameworks; instead, she is willing to use new frameworks, such as those provided by psychoanalysis and anthropology, to explore new frontiers of human experiences and represent them as a novelist. But, being a “realist” after all, she does not make the new points of view – libido, Eros, “blood-consciousness” or other related concepts – into a new ideal or new metaphysics. As she herself proclaims, she is more interested in *describing and revealing* (in her own word *qishi*), rather than passionately espousing any of the realities as the ultimate truth of humanity – not to the extent that Lawrence was ready to espouse in his manifesto-like declarations.

Lacking individual volition or awareness, that is, the kind of individualism characteristic of the European or China’s cosmopolitan, educated bourgeoisie, Zhang’s characters are rather to be seen as *creature of circumstance*. The question is then: devoid of any romantic aspirations in the manner of Yu Dafu’s or even Zhang Ziping’s characters, and lacking any decadent or rebellious zeal of the characters of *haipai* literature, where exactly does Zhenbao’s audacious sexuality come from? If he is nothing but a creature of circumstance, then *what circumstances exactly* are allowing, maintaining and even nurturing such persistently vital sensuality and sexuality?

Zhenbao, as I have pointed out, is not someone who pursues morality or immorality for their own sakes, and he has not been consciously nourishing any of the two poles in his

being; so there must be some other explanations for the continued, *simultaneous strengthening* of both sides of his personality. So the above question could be rephrased as: *what circumstances have been nourishing the opposite (the hedonist and puritan) sides of Zhenbao, if it is not himself who has been nourishing them?*

III

Libidinal Economy:

Capitalism, Colonial Metropolitanism and the Geography of Desire

For theorists like Deleuze and Guattari, the answer for the questions is capitalism, which they have characterized as a schizophrenic machine that constantly “deterritorializes” and “reterritorializes” its subjects.

According to Rober Young, Deleuze and Guattari’s most important theoretical contribution is that they produced a *social* theory of desire that “cuts through the problematic psychic-social opposition in orthodox psychoanalysis (159). Disregarding the Nietzschean impulse in their work (mostly attributable to Deleuze), the general thrust of their collaborative work is their attempt to synthesize Marx and Freud and their recognition that “desire is a *social*, rather than an individual, product.” And having “separated desire from the subject” (which Freud’s psychoanalysis still tenaciously holds on to) by defining sexuality as “the libidinal unconscious of political economy,” they “opened up new possibilities for the analysis of the dynamics of desire in the social field (Young 160).

III.1 The libidinal economy – capitalism, colonialism and territories of desire

Deleuze and Guattari's theoretical enterprise is immensely helpful for the analysis of characters like Zhenbao, whom I have termed as "creatures of circumstance," meaning a creature of the social circumstances. One important aspect of Zhenbao's personality, an aspect that neither the philistine nor the modernist discourse could satisfactorily account for is the *regularity* in his seemingly extraordinary libidinal adventures: if "being bad" is part of being a tourist, it is exactly what Zhenbao has practiced with the Parisian prostitute; if "partying" is part of being a (modern) college student, it is exactly what Zhenbao has done with Rose; if having an "illicit affair" is a trend among "fashionable" adult males,¹⁶¹ it is exactly what has happened to Zhenbao with Jiaorui. In other words, Zhenbao's so-called "asocial" sexual impulses are actually all developed within certain *social* orbits and zones that modern capitalism has built in itself.

The question is then: why would capitalism, driven by the principle of productivity and profit, provide conditions that nourish hedonistic desire and uninhibited sexuality?

Deleuze and Guattari read capitalism as "a territorial writing machine." According to them, the basic need of capitalism is to engineer an encounter between "the deterritorialized wealth of capital and the labour capacity of the deterritorialized worker."¹⁶² They observe that, in the history of social and economic forms, capitalism is "the only social machine that is constructed on the basis of decoded flows." In the process of deterritorializing and decoding, the old social ties that used to code and check desire are broken; capitalism therefore "liberates the flow of desire" in an unprecedented manner

¹⁶¹Such affairs were the focal but controversial topic during the heyday of Zhang Ziping's fame; but by the 1940s, in the writings of the so-called "Dong Wu clan" it has become a fashion.

¹⁶²Deleuze and Guattari, "Balance Sheet – Program for Desiring Machines," quoted in Robert Young, 164.

(Deleuze and Guattari 139).¹⁶³ Furthermore, according to Robert Young, who has incorporated Deleuze and Guattari's theoretical work into his analysis of colonialism, the inter workings of capitalism and colonialism create a *political economy of desire across and through geographical distribution*.¹⁶⁴

Indeed, it is through such a colonial “political economy” that Zhenbao the lower-middle class Shanghai urbanite is uprooted and transported to the center of the colonial empire, admitted to the engineering department of a British college, trained to become the “deterritorialized” worker, waiting to encounter the call of the “deterritorialized” international capital in Shanghai. In the process he experiences a decoding – decoded from the rules of his Shanghai urbanite social circle – and operates instead according to the rules of a metropolitan college, in which students with drastic social, cultural, ethnic differences are assembled into one temporary community, equalized somehow as fellow labor candidates in a capitalist market operating under the universalizing principle of money and exchange. It is under such a setting of deterritorialization and decoding that Zhenbao the Shanghai lower-middle class young man could be more or less “equal” with his new girlfriend Rose, a well-to-do, British-Chinese girl. And it is in such a decoded setting that the lower-middle class Chinese man Zhenbao could party and date like an ultra-modern metropolitan college young man in Britain.

The roles that I have mentioned in regard to Zhenbao – tourists across borders of regions and nations, college students in a metropolitan center, young professionals circulating in the globalized market of labor and capital – are among the deterritorialized

¹⁶³“Savages, Barbarians, Civilized Men” from *Anti-Oedipus*, p139.

¹⁶⁴See Young's well-known article “Colonialism and the Desiring Machine,” collected in *Postcolonial*

groups made possible by capitalism's deterritorializing machine, who are, when they are in that role and state, most likely to be unchecked in their libidinal desires, promiscuous in both social and sexual terms.

But this is only one half of the story. Simultaneous to the deterritorialiation and decoding and the flow of desires, capitalism, in order to maximize productivity and efficiency, also demands puritanism and the absolute *functionality* of social groups, organized under class, racial, and cultural differences. Deleuze and Guattari have formulated this process as:

“[...] the twofold movement of decoding or deterritorializing flows on the one hand, and their violent and artificial reterritorialization on the other. The more the capitalist machine deterritorializes, decoding and axiomatizing flows in order to extract surplus value from them, the more its ancillary apparatuses, such as government bureaucracies and the forces of law and order, do their utmost to reterritorialize, absorbing in the process a larger and larger share of surplus value” (Young 164).

Zhenbao is the perfect product of this schizophrenic capitalist machine. On one hand he is more ready than anyone to let go of his libido impulses in the “free” zones opened up by the forces of deterritorialization; but on the other hand he is more zealous than anyone in aspiring to social acceptability and successful functionality in the capitalist corporate world -- which means he has to give up one after another the kind of women that he has acquired under the former setting.

Zhenbao's “failure” is that he finally has not succeeded in maintaining either the schizophrenic separation or the balance between the two impulses that capitalism has trained and nourished – he falls for the charm of the socially and sexually promiscuous Jiaorui when he is just beginning to make his way up the corporate ladder in Shanghai,

when he needs to remain puritan and desexualized in order to prove reliable and trustworthy to his capitalist employer.

The “ideal” situation for someone like Zhenbao is to lead a double life and for a period he has. He has been workaholic by day and hedonistic by night during his affair with Jiaorui. During the day

“[h]e was a man with a future, of course, a top-notch textual engineer. His working style was special: nose to the grindstone, too busy to lift his head. The foreign boss was constantly calling for him: ‘Tong! Tong! Where’s Tong?’ . . . He liked summer, but even when it wasn’t summer he’d be so busy that he’d work up a sweat. The elbows and knees of his Western-style suit were full of creases like laugh lines. Chinese colleagues would complain about his manner and look.”¹⁶⁵

After a day’s sweating in the corporate office, he rides happily home to the woman that represents pleasure, a woman who is foreign, exotic, sexually vivacious -- and someone else’s wife, whom he has no responsibility to marry.

But the balance of that well-maintained universe is unsettled by Jiaorui’s change of heart and by her demand to get married. Zhenbao is very aware of the rules of the capitalist society he lives in: having an illicit affair is one thing, openly marrying your friend’s wife – and such a non-domestic one – is another. Instinctively he knows that there are rules and limits in the capitalist machine’s tolerance of hedonism. As Deleuze and Guattari put it: “Capitalism [...] liberates the flows of desire, but under the social conditions that define its limit and the possibilities of its own dissolution, so that it is constantly opposing with all its exasperated strength the movement that drives it toward this limit” (153).

All these offer explanations for the “regularity” in Zhenbao’s seemingly adventurous sexual encounters: *they have all taken place within the well-regimented roles*

and spaces prescribed by the capitalist machine – the tourist, the college student, the pleasure-seeking corporate elite etc. And any attempt to go beyond that is to meet real and serious consequences.

The cynical Aldous Huxley laid out the “rules” for a modern male like Zhenbao:

The only satisfactory way of existing in the modern, highly specialized world is to live with two personalities. A Dr. Jekyll that does the metaphysical and scientific thinking, that transacts business in the city, adds up figures, designs machines, and so forth. And a natural, spontaneous Mrs. Hyde to do the physical, instinctive living in the intervals of work. The two personalities should lead their unconnected lives apart, without poaching on one another’s preserves or inquiring too closely into one another’s activities. Only by living discretely and inconsistently can we preserve both the man and the citizen, both the intellectual and the spontaneous animal being, alive within us. The solution may not be very satisfactory; but it is, I believe now ... the best that, in the modern circumstances, can be devised.¹⁶⁶

Zhenbao’s story is realistic and at the same time socially highly symbolic. His “failure” has proven that Huxley’s rules are hard to live by: it is impossible to forever confine one’s sexual living and one’s life instincts to the roles and spaces prescribed by the capitalist machine. Zhenbao’s tragedy proves that the schizophrenic “Dr. Jekyll and Mrs. Hyde” existence is, as Huxley himself finds it, indeed “not very satisfactory”: the rest of Zhenbao’s life, the novella tells us, is spent in oscillations between puritan accountability and spouts of dissipation and self-destructiveness until he is consumed by these pulling forces.

III. 2. Back home in the urban jungle – colonialism, metropolitanism and popular modernism

¹⁶⁵Based on Kingsbury’s translation (283), with modification.

¹⁶⁶Huxley, “Wordsworth in the Tropics” (1929), collected in Kermode, Frank and John Hollander ed. *Modern British Literature*, “Oxford Anthology of English Literature,” 1973.

Now let's come to articulate what the circumstances are that allow the encounter between Zhenbao and Jiaorui – the protagonists of the most important erotic relationship in the novella. And what circumstances have nourished the kind of sexuality represented by Jiaorui?

The encounter between Zhenbao, a Western educated Chinese man and Shanghai native, and Jiaorui, a Western educated South Seas ethnic Chinese (with a touch of hybridity judging from her appearance), takes place in the city of Shanghai, a semi-colonial Chinese city. For some reasons this city has a lot to do with sex and sexuality.

Deterritorialization is one of the most striking features that shock the newcomers to Shanghai. Countless Republican social novels open with an outcry deploring the city's lack of boundaries and its astonishing ability to forge skin-deep mingling of people of different origins and classes, and the ability of transporting people across social stations, upward or downward – all serving the purpose of an extremely robust profit-generating machine, but also producing the largest erotic industry ever known in history.¹⁶⁷

But that was the situation when the city was at the height of its population influx from the surrounding provinces of China. Once these newcomers had more or less settled down, that is, when they were gradually reorganized into a new social and communal setting operating under a mixture of rules of their pre-Shanghai social origins and that of the Shanghai setting, this wave of population stopped being the most deterritorialized sector. This relatively stabilized setting would produce the first generation of “native”

shanghairen like Zhenbao, who has grown up with clear -- although always pliant (since it's after all Shanghai) -- rules to follow.

When this generation of young native *shanghairen* grew up, the most deterritorialized and decoded sector in the city has shifted. Following the establishment of the Nationalist government and the so-called “new methods of imperialism” after the First World War, which introduced “the joint exploitation of the world by internationally united finance capital” in place of the old model that was based on “mutual rivalries of national finance capitals” (Bergère 259), Shanghai became an international metropolis, flying on the double wings of cosmopolitan nationalist and neo-colonialist capitals. The cosmopolitan, promiscuous crowd in the 1930s, from the modern college campuses to the bars, cafes and cabarets in the city center, which attracted influx of the young and the modern from all over Asia,¹⁶⁸ became the new, most “decoded” part of the city, in which the collapse of social, cultural, racial and gender boundaries felt uncannily exciting and intoxicating – liberating one’s otherwise socially checked impulses, such as the sexual and erotic impulses.

The psychological effects of this cosmopolitan deterritorialization were amply recorded in the novels of the so-called *haipai* writers., be it dandyist Teng Gu and Ye Lingfeng or New Perceptionist writers like Liu Naou and Mu Shiyong. The confusing but enchanting flow of sexual/libidinal energies in *haipai* writings is as much the result of the metropolitan urban setting as it is of the sex-oriented culture coming from the influence of Western decadent and modernist writers. While keeping the modernist connection in mind,

¹⁶⁷ According to a S.D. Gamble’s survey on the cities with the largest population of prostitutes (London, Berlin, Paris, Chicago, Nagoya, Tokyo, Peking, Shanghai) in 1917, Shanghai ranks highest in terms of the ratio between registered prostitutes and the overall population. (Xu Jun and Yang Hai 85).

one should also note *haipai* culture's deep complicity with a new international commodity culture and consumer culture -- a new mode of the mass culture which high modernism was originally set against, but quickly found itself absorbed into.

In the Chinese context, the new metropolitanism in the 1930s was different from the May Fourth era cosmopolitanism and bohemianism in two crucial aspects.

First, through the link with the international commodity culture it introduced a cosmopolitanism and an everyday hybrid culture that are *pleasurable and convenient rather than shocking and subversive*. Nothing better captures it than the confession from a Mu Shiyong character, who is supposed to be a rebel but he says he will lose his (rebel) soul if he is taken from "the luxurious life made of jazz, fox-trot, cocktail, Paris fashion of the season and eight-cylinder sports car" ("Black Peony" *hei mudan* 1933). In such a materialistic and hedonistic metropolitanism, material consumption and bodily comfort cannot be separated from, or are even the condition of, sensuous rebellion and sexual freedom. And it becomes much more widespread than the first wave of bohemianism through the unrelenting capitalist and consumerist machine – if not materially, then at least imaginatively through Hollywood films.

Second, this kind of metropolis is able to contain all opposites in one: civilization and libidinal jungle, practicality and dissipation, Western and Chinese, modernism and commercialism. It thus has undermined the supposed confrontations between the said forces, and has subsumed all into one overarching late capitalist and metropolitan reality.

Such an everyday (meaning convenient and widespread, no longer shocking or subversive) metropolitanism and existential hybridity are very nicely registered by the

¹⁶⁸In *haipai* literature of this period, one often reads about Japanese or Southeast Asian females with a much more cosmopolitan mindset, who flocked to Shanghai for employment opportunities in the international

personality of Jiaorui, who is both Asian and Western, both sophisticated like the modern city but also creaturely like the urban jungle, whose sexuality is primitive and wholesome but also artificial and well-trained. I call it “existential hybridity” for it is no longer hybridity in purely racial, social or gender terms, it is also hybridity in existential state: if the Jiaorui character makes impossible clear distinctions between Chinese and the exotic race, between masculinity and femininity, or between the public and the domestic, it also makes impossible the distinction between the natural and the artificial, between the civilized and the creaturely.

Metropolitan hybridity that defies the boundaries of gender, race and culture, as well as the boundary between nature and artificiality, is a recurring theme in Zhang’s works. In *Love in a Fallen City* it finds representation in the character of the Indian socialite – Liusu’s potential rival. In *The First Brazier* it finds representation in the character of Qiao Qiqiao – another dangerous and fatal creature that an ordinary new-generation *shanghairen* (Weilong) falls head over heels for despite all struggles and initial denials.

Importantly, in all three cases, the unnerving mixtures combine to make a pleasurable exoticism for the sensual enjoyment and excitement of the opposite sex – an exoticism that has as much to do with wild wanderlust as well as the comfortable longing for pleasure and sensuous materialism. This is a crucial difference between the primitivism or exoticism in high modernism and the primitivism and exoticism created by the metropolitan urban jungle, *although both could nourish the imagination of the sexual unconscious.*

The most deceiving aspect of this fashionable primitivism is that the libidinal jungle of the metropolis is actually deeply and secretly connected to the other side of the town – that is, to the rational world of industrial, financial capital that primitivism is supposed to rebel against. The dubious nature of such a primitivism shows clearly in the character of Jiaorui.

If Zhenbao has fallen for Jiaorui by the principle of pleasure, Jiaorui turns out to have fallen for Zhenbao by *both* the pleasure *and* the puritan principles. On one hand Jiaorui likes Zhenbao because he is her kindred spirit – she sees that he is just like her, a person that “like to eat and play around as much as I do.” On the other hand, she prefers him to the other men in her life for exactly the opposite reason – she likes him because he is a “busy man”: “I . . . have nothing to do, but I have no respect for people like me. What I like most is to wrest a bit of time from a man who’s very busy – the way a tiger seizes its prey. Pretty despicable, don’t you think?” (Kingsbury 274)

In other words, the seemingly very creaturely Jiaorui is not that creaturely after all: there is another side of her that is very worldly and sanguine, fully versed in the rationality of money. In the relationship between Zhenbao and Jiaorui, one important attraction and asset of Zhenbao vis-à-vis the well-to-do and spoiled Jiaorui is established on the premise that he is made to succeed in the capitalist machine: Zhenbao is trained in the most pragmatic field, thinks in the most pragmatic way, and he is extremely hardworking and socially extremely zealous; in other words, he is the ideal corporate man. He might not be rich when he meets Jiaorui, but Jiaorui knows that he will be – it is as certain as the certain triumph of the international capital in the neo-colonialist Shanghai.

In a strikingly similar manner, the Qiao Qiqiao character in *The First Brazier* has also recognized Weilong's potential to bring money to the household and has chosen her out of that consideration – as always, the metropolitan creature needs both sex and money.

Called by some critics modernism's "second generation," and by some "popular modernism,"¹⁶⁹ the metropolitan modernism as reflected in the *haipai* writers' works is the result of modernism entering urban commodity culture. Or, to put it differently, the great divide between high modernism and commodity culture has fused into one popular modernism that has built in itself both sides of the argument. Zhenbao's true failure lies in that he fails to recognize that in the creaturely and promiscuous Jiaorui lies another Jiaorui who *can* fit into the corporate world he works in and can be a money-wise, world-smart wife. It is however a contradiction that is too great and confusing for someone like Zhenbao.¹⁷⁰

In this chapter we have looked at three key dimensions of modern sexuality: the *social* dimension as associated with the issue of gender; the *asocial* dimensions as associated with modern self and its unconscious; and the *material* dimension, by which modern sexuality is entwined with the libidinal economy of advanced capitalism.

I have argued that Zhang's works have registered all three dimensions of modern sexuality; and in *Red Rose White Rose* she has embedded the layers of meaning that sex has acquired in the twentieth century in the sexual history of one average middle-class/urbanite

¹⁶⁹For metropolitan, popular modernism in the Western context see Peter Brooker *Modernity and Metropolis: Writing, Film and Urban Formations* (Palgrave 2002), for the Japanese context see titles such as Barbara Sato's *The New Japanese Woman* (Duke 2003), for the Chinese context see Shih Shumei, *The Lure of the Modern: Writing Modernism in Semi-colonial China (1917-1937)* (UC press, 2001).

¹⁷⁰This reading explains the plot in the later part of the novella. When Zhenbao accidentally meets Jiaorui on a bus, Jiaorui by now has aged and has remarried and born a child. She seems to be a normal wife now – one

male. Zhang, while obviously upholding a typically modernist critique of industrialization, rationalization and middle-class philistinism, is actually void of any romantic and utopian aspirations and sees the sexual and libidinal transgressions of the moderns as ultimately *structured* – as oil for the global capitalist engine, systematically maintained and nourished by the metropolitan urban culture.

The episodic nature of the plot – Zhenbao in his sexual experience not only repeats many that went before him, in the text he even repeats himself from episode to episode without ever truly understanding why – are formal features that are in perfect harmony with Zhang’s critical vision of the “ideal modern (Chinese) man”: how his existence is over-determined, even in the most personal and the most vital parts of it. Although Zhang may not be the first or only writer to recognize the essential unoriginality of the modern existence, she is certainly the first modern Chinese writer who has found a *form* for that vision.

aspect of her that Zhenbao is never able to register or to piece together with the other side of her that has attracted him in the first place.

Epilogue

Art, Culture and the People: Zhang Ailing in Context

1942, in Japanese-occupied Shanghai, a group of authors gathering around the journal *Panorama* (*Wanxiang*), one of the best-selling journals of the time, launched a so-called “New Popular Literature Movement” (*xin tongsu wenxue yundong*), which calls for a literature that transcends the difference or division between “New Literature” (*xin wenxue*) and “Old Literature” (*jiu wenxue*). And it argues that only such a literature would be “truly enjoyed by the masses.”

Almost simultaneously, another leading journal of occupied Shanghai, *Journal* (*Zazhi*) held a series of forum discussions for the promotion of “New Art” (*xin wenyi*). The term “New Art” was carried over from earlier leftist discussions in Chongqing. The advocated “New Art” was meant to correct the elitist tendency of the May Fourth literature and at the same time correct the sacrifice of art in the leftist “Art for the Masses” (*wen yi dazhong hua*) movement of the late 1930s.

Such was the enchanted atmosphere in which Zhang Ailing emerged. Most of her novellas were published by the above two literary journals. A legitimate question to ask is then: judging by the favor that they showed Zhang’s works, can one assume that Zhang Ailing’s novels fitted what they were calling for?

The call for some kind of new literature that is on one hand not elitist, but on the other hand “art” (*zuowei yishu de wenxue*) seems to be the common destination that all serious writers arrived at despite their slightly different starting points. Between 1939 and

1944, in the Japanese occupied North (Huabei) there was the discussion on “Building the New Art” (*jianshe xin wenyi*, later changed to the name “New Renaissance” *xin wenyi fuxing*) among writers like Chen Yi who, in his famous “Introduction to People’s Literature” (“minzhong wenxue daolun”) declared that his “People’s Literature” is against “the two kinds of ivory-tower literature since the May Fourth, the sentimental literature and the satiric literature” and it is also against “the leftist Literature for the Masses.” In 1940 Chai Kuning in his influential “Thesis on Rebuilding and Renewing Literature” (*zaijian di wenxue gexin lun*) spoke against socialist realism and advocated “a post-realist [*chao xieshi zhuyi*] literature that has as its content a ‘renewed populism’ [*gexin de minben zhuyi*].”¹⁷¹

With a lesser degree of polemical urgency and self-consciousness, some established modern writers were, already in the 1930s, showing reactions to the elitism and intellectualism of post-May Fourth literature. Beside the leftist “Literature for the Masses” movement mentioned above, the liberal writers were also experimenting with alternative theories and practices. The Crescent Moon (*Xin yue*) is one of the journals that led the liberalist reflections on the May Fourth legacy, showing special concern about the *literary*, rather than cultural or political, crisis ushered in by New Literature. In the October 1930 issue of *Crescent Moon* journal, Shao Xunmei, under the title “The Novel and the Story” (*xiaoshuo yu gushi*) expresses a concern that is later also echoed by other Crescent Moon Society figures such as Shen Congwen:

Modern novelists seemed to have neglected “story” . . . We are not sure whether the novel has embarked on a new path or actually entered a decline. . . . Of course the existence of a novel does not just rely on the story, but without the story the novel can hardly find a rationale to exist.

¹⁷¹Editorial for the debut issue of the journal *The Masses* (*Dazhong* 1942, 11).

The Chinese novel has embarked on a path that is not recognizable even to those who walk it. The readers feel discontent but cannot articulate why. . . . Without the story, is the novel still meaningful?

These writers lamented the replacement of “story” with social or ideological message, although they had not come to the point of saying that the essence of novel is “*gushi*.” The writers who consistently call his or her oeuvre “*gushi*” happen to be the two most original novelists in the 1930s and 1940s, Shen Congwen and then later Zhang Ailing. Shen Congwen’s claim “there are enough people writing the ‘novel’ in China, but few are writing ‘stories’” (*Yuxia xiaojing* tiji, 1933) is very close to Zhang Ailing’s pronouncement that “the novel should be written as a story” (“A writing of one’s own,” 1944). Both made the concept of “story” central to their philosophy of the novel.

Even the New Perceptionist writer Shi Zhecun resorted to “story” in his fiction in the 1930s.¹⁷² Shi Zhecun’s experiment was exemplary of a regressive tendency, where authors, in search of alternative narrative modes to post-May Fourth realism, resorted to traditional narratives such as anecdote, historical legend, personal note (*biji*) and travel journal. The above mentioned popular literary journals of the early 1940s were filled with such literatures.

Based on all this, one can say with certainty that something culturally important is at stake at this stage of modern Chinese literature. It’s a moment when the notion of (literary) *art* persisted in the midst of widespread resentment against elitism and against the ideological, intellectual function of literature. As a reaction to the intellectualization of literature, some even preferred simpler and more primitive kinds of literature.

From the New Novel (*xin xiao-shuo*) of the late Qing to May Fourth New Literature (*xin wen-xue*), there was, under the guise of vernacularization, an intellectualization of

literature. Literature as such did not just serve the purpose of communal entertainment, literati private enjoyment or anecdotal gossip. It became the mouthpiece of modern intellectual or ideological discourses. This historical background had a significant impact on modern Chinese literature, especially on the development of the modern Chinese novel, making the traditionally marginal genre into an elitist vehicle.

Equally significant was the modern notion of *art* introduced in the same period. Just as there was a heavy social, cultural package behind the intellectualization of literature, there was an equally heavy cultural package behind the concept of *literary art* (*zuowei yishu de wenxue*). To truly understand the situations that Chinese literature and culture faced in the early 1940s, one has to take a look at the tradition to which it was reacting and which it was inheriting.

The concept of *art* – as something autonomous and distinguished from the rest of human activities – is a modern concept, which was imported to China in the late Qing and made influential by intellectuals like Wang Guowei and Lu Xun. Lu Xun’s formulation of “art” is quite exemplary in this regard: “Art has three essential elements: first is the objective world, second is subjective cognition, third is aesthetics. Because art must have these three elements, *the boundary between art and other things is extremely clear* (“Opinion on the dissemination of art” *Ni bobu meishu yijian shu*, 1913, emphasis mine).”

Such a conception of art was accompanied by a new notion of the artist. Actually it was the Zhou brothers who, among the late Qing intellectuals, first introduced the idea of an *individual artist’s vision* as essential to the New Fiction – a concept formulated by

¹⁷²See stories like *Jiangjun de tou*, *Li Shishi*, *Ye cha*, *Xiong zhai* etc.

Liang Qichao. They therefore became the most important link between New Fiction of the late Qing period and New Literature of the May Fourth period, because, according to Chen Pingyuan (1988), it is not until the May Fourth generation that the modern novel became an art in its own right (*chun wenxue de xiaoshuo*).

Furthermore, another sign of the appearance of art in its modern sense is when its production becomes increasingly individualized – “individualized” here refers not only to the fact of individual authorship, but more importantly to *individualism as cognitive and social freedom*. Yet this phenomenon developed side by side with another situation: the professionalized author, who cannot afford to write for himself or a specific patron only, who rather relies on the consumption and reception of that literature on an increasingly large social scale. Then the question of how exactly the individual author resolves the contradiction of individualization and socialization of his or her writing becomes the most complex and difficult question.

The complexity involved in such a situation can be illustrated with the example of Zhou Zuoren’s concept of “Literature of the Commoner” (*pingmin wenxue*, 1919, 1). In a way Zhou Zuoren’s “Literature of the Commoner” is a theory that justifies the relevance of the individual artist’s vision to the rest of humanity -- a doctrine that at first glance easily compares with the emphasis on ordinary consciousness by the “New Popular Literature” advocates in the 1940s; yet, on closer look, its point is ultimately about the legitimacy of the individual vision of the artist.

Zhou Zuoren first defines how he understands the creative individual (*geren*): “Literature of the commoner should use sincere style to record sincere thoughts and truthful facts. . . . [The author], considering himself as a member of humanity, mingling

among other humans, [feels that] the concern of other humans is also my concern.” Having made this link between the individual and the rest of humanity, he finally reaches, in “Criteria for the New Literature” (*Xin wenxue de yaoqiu*, 1920, 1), what he truly wants to say. There he states that a writer is someone who “artfully expresses his or her individual feeling, which, since he or she is speaking as a member of the humanity, also represents the will of humanity.” Obviously it is the “self” that is being elevated here, but this self regards itself as the conscience and soul of humanity.

Here it is important to note that this writing self is not just any individual, but an enlightened individual committed to universal moral purposes and the social, cultural progress of the general public. As Zhou Zuoren states in the same essay:

Literature of the Commoner is not popular literature. Because Literature of the Commoner is just written for the commoners to read, but [it is a literature that] studies the commoner’s – the human’s – life. . . . Just as words from the prophet and the pioneer might not be understood by all, Literature of the Commoner does not have to be understood by every peasant or vagabond. . . .
 . . . Literature of the Commoner is meant to study the life of all humans and how can it be improved toward the right direction. . . .

What happens between these lines is nothing short of a revolution which set down the New Culture movement’s articulation of the relationship between *self*, progressive *art*, and *culture*: first, through the enlightened devotion to the abstract, universalistic value of humanism, an individual artist transcends mere individuality and makes his or her art therefore relevant and meaningful to the rest of society and humanity. Second, by belonging to a cultural order that proclaims to proceed ahead of society, art becomes something distinguished and differentiated from the life-world.

When Liang Qichao, who was the first to use the term “revolution” in literary matters, assigned fiction the lofty mission of nation-building and cultural renewal and

relied on the New Fiction for the renovation of “morality, ... religion, ... politics, ... social customs, ... learning and arts, ... and even the human mind and its character” (“On fiction and education of the masses” *Lun xiaoshuo yu qunzhi de guanxi*, 1902),¹⁷³ he was making a move that is utterly modern. It was a move that separated literature from the life-world, lifted it into a realm called Culture – that is, culture with the capital “C”, which encompasses “morality...religion...politics...social customs...learning and arts... and even the human mind and its character,” and is meant, in the clear context of Liang’s essay, to be a *critical* and *regenerating* force to the life-world.¹⁷⁴ The authors of such fiction should accordingly change, in Chen Pingyuan’s words, from “any one in the market” (*huashi fanggu*) to “noble and cultured gentlemen” (*daya junzi*).

Along with the process of abstraction of literature from the life-world, it is returned again to the life-world as objects of mass consumption, through the flourishing modern journalism and publishing industry. However it is important to note that the New Fiction in Liang’s ideal is meant for mass consumption not as objects of mere entertainment in everyday life, but as means for inner “cultivation” -- namely for the education of a standard, cultured new citizen of a new society. It is a process that can be characterized as one that makes the masses aristocratic by making arts democratic. Indeed, from the embodiment of

¹⁷³Liang opens his famous essay with the following lines:

“[i]f one intends to renovate the people of a nation, one must first renovate its fiction[,]” to renovate morality, one must renovate fiction; to renovate religion, one must renovate fiction; to renovate politics, one must renovate fiction; to renovate social customs, one must renovate fiction; to renovate learning and arts, one must renovate fiction; and to renovate even the human mind and remold its character, one must renovate fiction.” Translation is based on Denton (1996).

¹⁷⁴Among the meanings that the term *culture* acquired during the critical period from the last decades of the 18th century to the first half of the 19th century¹⁷⁴, one meaning is especially related to the new conception of *art*. According to Raymond Williams’ research, the term *culture* started to mean “the general body of the arts”, about the same time when literature, music, painting, sculpture, architecture, theatre etc. were grouped together under the new phrase *the arts* -- as having something essentially in common which distinguished them from other human activities (*Keywords, Culture and Society*).

the new culture in New Fiction to the internalization of New Fiction as new culture, the process is complete.

The May Fourth conception of art must be understood against this intellectual background. The May Fourth concept of art is not only an aesthetic concept, but also a *cultural* one. A piece of literary art separates itself from the lifeworld not only through its autonomous formal and aesthetic totality, but more importantly through the authorial vision, which is derived from the values of the “New Culture,” the latter meant to be a critical “other” to the life-world.

To understand the concept of art advocated by the “New Popular Literature” or “New Art” movements in the 1940s, it is important to see how differently they conceive art in relation to cultural order. They do not assign art to a higher order of critical and reflective culture, but relate it instead to some *ethos and structure immanent in the life-world itself*. Or to put it differently: the modern habit of defining literature in relation to a social and cultural whole remains; but that “whole” is virtually identified with the life-world itself.^d

For example, the “spirit of the epoch” -- the cultural and social whole that the “New Popular Literature” should embody -- comes to stand for, in *Wan-Hsiang* authors’ conception, a shared state-of-mind, conditioned by a shared material, social and cultural environment, inhabited and represented by the majority of the people. It has none of the lofty cultural connotations of the May Fourth counterpart:

What is popular? . . . To put it simply: an era and a society usually manifests in a certain kind of consciousness. Individuals may differ in their thinking, but, living in the same society, subject to the same stimuli, the majority of them must share some common consciousness. It might not represent the

totality [of that era], but it can certainly be the representation of that era's important tendencies.¹⁷⁵

Here – let's recall Zhou Zuoren's definition of the Literature of the Commoner – the importance of an individual author's vision disappears, replacing it is the emphasis on the collective and the communal. However, contradictory or not to this shift of emphasis, the idea of *art* – art as antithesis to life, or as different from life – persists among the writers of the '40s as one of the most established post-May Fourth legacies.

Talking of “art taking root in life” or “art transcending life,” the habit of conceiving *art* as an entity in itself and discussing its relation vis-à-vis *life* was as natural as breathing for this generation of urban intelligentsia. But the question is: without the plateau of a *critical culture*, could the concept of *art*, intricately bound with the former, be maintained? What can now separate *art* from the mere actuality of *life*?

i) *Art*: the first impasse facing the 1940s and Zhang Ailing's solution

In general, the creative practices of the so-called New Art authors, who occupied the pages of *Wang-xiang* and *Za-zhi* next to Zhang Ailing, failed to relate the immediate life event to a larger vision – be it the ethos and structure abstracted from the life-world itself, or borrowed wings from some other sources. It is true that *Literary Society* writers and even the Zhou brothers produced many simple stories about simple life events, but, because a wider humanistic perspective informs their portrayal of individual human beings, and because their recording of concrete social problems is charged with intense critical thinking, those life events in their works do not appear trifling or insignificant.

¹⁷⁵Ding Di, “The definition of popular literature” *Wan-Hsiang*, 1942, vol. IV, p141.

Lacking all this, the stories of *Wan-Hsiang* authors appear largely as trifling recordings of actual life situations, although sometime using a tone of irony to render an authorial vantage point above the mundane story, sometimes using a relentless satire to distance the author's point of view from the character's.¹⁷⁶

The frustration is not theirs alone. In *Journal* a published, formal discussion among young writers was titled "What should we write?" in which one writer proclaims that the urgent issue is not to decide what to write, but to answer the question "Why write?" – the cultural or social purpose and meaning of literature -- which he considers essential for solving the issue of "How to write?"

Their problems signal a special moment in modern Chinese literary history: distanced from both the old cultural heritage that still enchanted the pages of the Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies school, and from the humanist, futuristic New Culture that lent wings to the May Fourth writers, the urban artists of Shanghai in the '40s find themselves, culturally speaking, at a new starting point. They need to answer these questions: 1) From what angle should they, now, look at life? 2) In what scheme does one now conceive the relationship between the writing self and the wider, reading public?

In a rare moment when she was forced to speak about her own writings,¹⁷⁷ Zhang offered her complete answer to the first question.

First, like some authors before her – Shen Congwen and Shi Zhecun among others – she tried not to rely on the readily set "meanings" derived from prevalent cultural and intellectual discourses. In the essay Zhang contends that

¹⁷⁶The former represented by the technique used by Yu Qie, the latter by Wei Yueyan.

a novel should be written as a story and let the story speak for itself. This is better than first setting the theme and then making up a story for it. . . . It is in this that modern literature differs from those in the past, namely, not putting too much emphasis on theme, but letting the story give what it can give, and letting the reader take what he or she can take. (“A writing of one’s own” 1944, 12)

Note here that she is self-consciously taking this characteristic to be that of the modern literature -- a notion of the *modern* that is, however, very different from what I have been illustrating¹⁷⁸.

But despite her suspicion of external, ideological meanings imposed on life, she does *not* seem to entertain the idea that the actuality of life would be enough for a work of literature. As she puts it in her essays, “the immediate reality, because too close, can only become clear if one views it in connection to another, more lucid reality” (“Foreigners’ view of Beijing opera” 1943, 11). “I think the method of uneven contrast is quite suitable [for the era she was writing about]. I use the memory that humans have accumulated through the ages to throw a revelatory light on the reality that surrounds us” (“A writing of one’s own” 1944, 12).

These remarks demonstrate her insistence on a *reflectivity* that good literature should maintain over the actuality of life. But whence does this reflective space come from? To this question that the “New Popular Literature” or “New Art” advocates failed to answer, Zhang offered her own, somewhat perplexing, solution that is called “uneven contrast” (*cancha de duizhao*).

¹⁷⁷This was triggered by Fu Lei’s scathing criticism of her *Love in the Fallen City* and *Interlocking Traps* in the journal *Wang-xiang*.

¹⁷⁸Zhang Ailing never used the term “modernism” (*xiandai zhuyi*) on her own writing. But what she refers to here as “modern literature” is actually modernist literature and modernist novel.

In her essays and novellas, Zhang has used the following two ways of creating such a “contrast”: one is spatial – the juxtaposition of the perspectives of two different cultures; one is temporal – the juxtaposition of two temporalities.

The previous chapters have discussed this method in great detail in relation to each of her representative texts. Here I want to point out that, although Zhang relies on the juxtaposition of two cultures or two temporalities to give reflective, cognitive depth to her writings, she has never assigned *a value hierarchy* to the two contrasting entities. The contrasting device is used as an *illuminating* perspective, not as a *critical* perspective. This is what is implied, I contend, in her very elusive and often misinterpreted term “*uneven contrast*” – the word “uneven” suggests that the hierarchy or difference between the parties in the contrast is neither stable nor absolute.

Embedded in this is the originality and significance of Zhang Ailing as a thinker: through this mode of writing Zhang maintained the reflectivity that is tantamount to the modern notion of art while she forsook the value-making role of the modern, elitist intellectual.

ii). *People: second impasse facing the 1940s and Zhang Ailing’s solution*

If Zhang’s “uneven contrast” answered my first question “from what angle should they, now, look at life?”, my second question, “in what scheme does one envision the relationship between the writing self and the wider, reading public?” remains unanswered.

One thing is clear: by the 1940s no one would entertain the naïve and arrogant notion that one individual could somehow speak for humanity (Zhou Zuoren, “Literature

of the Commoner”). As a contemporary critic put it, such “transcendental pretense” embodied “a profound arrogance that promoted self-righteousness, prohibited mutual understanding, and belied human diversity” (Solomon 1). Indeed, as Chen Dieyi points out in the title article for *Wan-Hsiang*’s special issue on the “New Popular Literature Movement” (1942, Issue 4), the May Fourth belief that the writer can understand people from all classes as long as he or she tries is sheer self-aggrandizement and arrogance on the part of the intellectuals.

With this May Fourth pretense thrown out, the theorists in the 1940s were left with two options: one camp tends to divide “people” into different classes and believes that any given individual author, situated in his or her life experience and social context, can only understand and appeal to a particular class. This view is represented by Chen Dieyi, the leading advocate of the “New Popular Literature” movement and the general editor of *Wan-Hsiang*. Another camp, represented by Ding Di, the second most active voice in the “New Popular Literature Movement,” still tries to argue for a certain degree of commonality, or some level of common consciousness, that is supposedly shared by people who “live in the same society and are subject to the same stimuli.”

These two views represent what I call the particularist and the universalist view on this matter. They indicate the theoretical dilemma that the various movements in the 1940s faced: if they want to produce a literature for the people and of the people, who exactly are “the people”? Is it a particular social class or social group? Or is it a more general entity such as “the masses”?

Zhang Ailing’s decision to write for *shanghairen* is a very individual, but brilliant, answer to the above-mentioned dilemma. On one hand, *Shanghairen* is a concrete social

group, not something abstract like Zhou Zuoren's "humanity." On the other hand, "*shanghairen*" is more than a social group, it refers to a certain kind of attitude, values and mindset shared by the majority of people living in that city. Zhang's "*shanghairen*" has therefore both the particularist and the universalist element. In addition, the nature of the city of Shanghai, as a pan-Chinese capital and even a world city, determines that the *shanghairen* mindset could have even wider, universal implications: on a certain level, *shanghairen*'s existence could speak for urban, modern existence in general.

Given her background, choosing *shanghairen* as the target readers was something very natural for Zhang Ailing. One can argue that it is out of a stroke of luck that Zhang has found the solution to the dilemma facing the literary theorists of the 1940s. But Zhang's creative practice proves that her success is more than just a stroke of luck. Compared to the contemporary writers who, consciously or unconsciously, also imagined *shanghairen* as their target readers, Zhang's fiction showed peerless sophistication.

From the particularist side, Zhang's ingenuity lies in her recognition of even finer divisions and alternative systems of values and culture under the rubric of *shanghairen*. In her work, she has not written about *shanghairen* per se, but concrete kinds of *shanghairen*. In *Love in a Fallen City* it is the homegrown, old-fashioned *shanghairen* meeting the cosmopolitan kind; in *The First Brazier* it is the cozy and decent world of the urbanite meeting the promiscuous and shady part of the city. By letting these different kinds of *shanghairen* and the systems they represent enter into conflict or exchange, Zhang greatly enlarges and enriches the social appeal of her works.

From the universalist side, Zhang's *shanghairen* always bear a universal dimension. Compared to characters in the works of other urbanite writers, Zhang's

characters are often framed in a system of symbolic meanings that go far beyond the local context. For example, Zhenbao is both a typical Shanghai philistine but also “an ideal *modern Chinese* man.” The past recalled in *Love in a Fallen City* is not only the cultural memory of the *shanghairen*, but also the cultural memory shared by all Chinese, including a South Seas Chinese like Fan Liuyuan. From the very beginning, what Zhang sees in “*shanghairen*” is a local manifestation of universal themes. In “After All a *Shanghairen*” where Zhang announces that her fiction is written for *shanghairen*, she already defines *shanghairen* as “the traditional Chinese plus the training of modern, high-pressure life,” apparently viewing *shanghairen* in universal terms such as the encounter between tradition and modernity.

These are the sociological and cultural implications of Zhang’s unique solution to the question of “people.” In the literary aspect, Zhang made a move that no theorist in her time had ever hinted at: in these theorists’ writing, whenever they discuss “people-friendly” forms, they refer to traditional narrative forms or forms of folk art, curiously omitting any discussion of the modern genres.¹⁷⁹ Zhang obviously went beyond that: she recognized that both the traditional folk forms and the modern commercial or popular forms are the ready signifiers in the shared cultural language of her *shanghairen* readers.

So in her fiction Zhang decided to “speak” to her reader through all these signifiers, whenever they prove fit for the subject matter and the content. As the previous chapters have demonstrated, engaging with these forms means engaging with the “structures of feeling” congealed in them. Zhang thus found the fictional language, or the key, with

¹⁷⁹ This appears to be the legacy of the populist movement since the 1920s which has devoted their attention to traditional and folk narratives.

which she could access and engage with the various layers of the consciousness of her target readers. Theorists like Chen Dieyi discussed the question of “consciousness” and recognized the necessity for the writer to gain intimate knowledge of that consciousness. But they never, as Zhang did, saw the connection between *generic forms and popular consciousness*.

Having answered the question “who are the people?” and “how does an author relate to their consciousness?”, Zhang has yet to solve the last problem: how does the so-called “New Popular Literature” or “People’s Literature” configure the relationship between the authorial consciousness and the consciousness of the people? Insisting on the notion of *art* means that the authorial consciousness has to be maintained, but how does that work with the other impulse of the 1940s – to make literature come as close as possible to the people?

Theorists of the 1940s believe that New Literature had never found a satisfactory solution to this question. For Chen Yi, the post-May Fourth period produced “two kinds of ivory-tower literature,” “the sentimental literature and the satiric literature.” One is self-indulgent while the other shows a superior stance to the characters under depiction -- both create distance between the author and the common people. Lu Xun once ridiculed the conventional “wisdom” prevalent in his time according to which writing about self is romanticism while writing about others is realism. Although displaying rather shallow understandings of the two “-isms,” such “wisdom” does reveal a rule that governs the writing of many post-May Fourth writers: when the character is the authorial self or is an autobiographical character, it is easier for the author to achieve intimacy with the character.

If the character is a person other than the authorial/autobiographical self, writers are more likely to write with “realism,” meaning a distanced objectivity that shows little intimacy with the character.

Beside the sentimental, autobiographical literature and the objective, satiric literature, the Literary Association writers tried to forge a third model, namely a lyrical realism in which the writer aims to make the third person narrative achieve the intimacy of the first-person writing, using methods such as the point of view technique and free indirect discourse. But, as Chapter I has pointed out, this school often assigns characters subjectivity and sentiments that don’t really belong to them, finally undermining the desired effects of realism or intimacy. In other words, the “intimacy” they reach with the characters is only a technical performance, not anything real.

What Zhang has achieved in regard to her fictional characters is highly significant if one views it against the genealogy of the modern Chinese novel as described above. Her breakthrough can be summed up in the following terms: on one hand, Zhang’s fiction does contain a third-person dimension, in which Zhang depicts her characters with such truthfulness and clarity that these characters, in their pathetic pettiness and self-deception, could feel quite belittled and distant from the authorial vantage point. But, at the same time, Zhang has also built in a first-person intimacy in her fiction. In her hands the point of view technique and free indirect discourse become vehicles of true understanding, intimacy and identification, to the point that Zhang’s novellas start to feel like the characters’ autobiographical confessions.

Zhang has attained in effect the balance that Zhou Zuoren dreamed of in his “Literature of the Commoner” – only *the terms are completely reversed*. If Zhou Zuoren’s

“Literature of the Commoner” starts with the assumption of a universalistic individualism, with the writer writing the “I” as if it was any member of humanity, Zhang wrote about any member of humanity as if she was writing about the self.

What does such a reversal signify? It means that fiction, in Zhang’s hands, has become a tool to truly *understand* others. In an incisive essay titled “The direction of the modern Chinese novel” (*xiandai zhongguo xiaoshuo de dongxiang*, 1940), Chen Yi observes that post-May Fourth literature is not true realism but literatures of self-expression: sentimental literature and satirical literature are two sides of the same coin, the former aggrandizing a heroic self superior to all, the latter aggrandizing an evil “other” carrying all the guilt for oneself. Neither shows effort to truly, objectively understand something outside the self.

Using Chen Yi’s vocabulary, what Zhang has achieved is something that sounds quite paradoxical: Zhang has completely erased sentimentalism in her depiction of her characters; but in her effort to truly understand them, she has come close to them (“close” suggesting intimacy and sentiment), as close as those writers of self-expression ever are to themselves. The insight she reaches about her characters, exactly because of the intimate relationship, is actually more mercilessly truthful.

Indeed, the truth that Zhang has found about the modern self is not pretty: the modern subject is narcissistic (Liusu), elusive (Liuyuan), split (Zhenbao), reified by the modern technocrat civilization (Wu Cuiyuan), or driven by a mysterious and impersonal force beyond the control or knowledge of the rational self (Weilong). As signaled by modernist novels like James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, *pure interiority* is what we have left after the integrated individual or even a coherent subjectivity is no longer relevant category for the

modern humanity. Indeed, Zhang has brought her readers so close to the fictional characters, making the readers delve so deep and intimately into the characters' inner life, only to find out at the end that this so-called inner life is just an interiority, it does not add up to either an autonomous individual or a coherent subject.

In conclusion, Zhang's creative practice bears testimony to a particular moment in the history of modern Chinese literature and culture. It is a moment when the impulse of reflectivity cultivated by the age of critical culture was still active, but the critical culture itself was in decline.¹⁸⁰ With the grand cultural universe and the elaborately established literary cosmos of the New Culture tradition in crisis, the authors of this period in fact had to create new ways of conceiving basic things such as the relationship between art and life and between literature and culture and society. Very few succeeded in finding a new alternative; many continued with the old paradigm, subdued in artistic and cultural energy and creativity.

What Zhang Ailing had achieved was nothing short of creating a new paradigm, in which all the above relationships – between art, culture and the people – were reconceived. So now let me finally articulate the significance of Zhang's creative thought and practice in the history of modern Chinese literature and culture – in the language and terminology spoken by that culture.

Sociologically speaking, Zhang Ailing had solved for herself the writer the question of “the people” (meaning the object of the writer's social representation) and of the reading public. To her, the people or the masses are not something abstract, it is

¹⁸⁰ The tradition of Utopian and critical culture continues in the Yan'an world and in the communist movement. But that's a different line of development not relevant for the context of this essay.

something concrete, even familiar – it is the urban commoner community that one can see and hear from the street below one’s balcony, or from the ads on the mosquito press. Taking herself as a member of the urban commoner community (the urban masses, so to speak), Zhang had turned around the previously available paradigms of the writer–public relationship: she avoided the post-May Fourth pretension of universal humanism (which often ended up with the writer or the intellectual holding the delusion that the writing self was a speaker for humanity in general), and the Proletarian literature’s impersonality (the masses are an impersonal, material force that should devour any notion of individuality), and changed the formula from “I am the masses” (universal humanism), “the masses are other people” (socialist materialism), to “the masses are me.”

Culturally speaking, Zhang was probably the only writer in her time to recognize that the urban commoners had a “culture” of their own. And out of sheer creative and critical genius, she recognized a new source of critical culture in the urban commoner: the urban commoner’s tenacious grassroots mentality was made into a source of critical culture to the rootless ultramoderns. And its worldly cultural anarchy was turned into a critical force countering the officiality of the high culture, which, although once a critical culture itself, had by the 1940s reified into a hegemonic cultural institution.

Aesthetically speaking, Zhang was the only writer who had found the aesthetic language – what I call “the style of abundance” – that corresponds to the cultural logic of the urban commoners. In the rich generic and imagery layers she created for her fiction, Zhang incorporated both the traditional, folk aesthetic and poetic forms and the modern commercial or popular forms and thus created a cultural and aesthetic language befitting the urban masses.

Epistemologically speaking, Zhang inherited the Enlightenment spirit but turned that spirit against Enlightenment itself – a quintessentially modernist epistemological project. Zhang’s fiction displays a typical modernist urge to reach full knowledge of the real and truly represent the real. But it ends up chasing “the real” to the frontier zones that the Enlightenment culture has not probed before: primitive mode of existence, unfathomable and uncontrollable nature, the unconscious parts of human psyche and sexuality. The enlightenment process that Zhang’s characters go through is then often a process of “dark enlightenment.” In the end Zhang’s creative project turned into a paradoxical, typically modernist project: to know the unknowable and represent the unrepresentable.

While keeping the epistemological reflectivity that is tantamount to the post-Enlightenment, modern literature, Zhang has however abandoned the Enlightenment confidence in the certainty of truth and its faith in ethical and cultural authorities. Having said that she found a new source of critical culture in the urban commoner’s provincial and anarchic world, I have to add that she did not however turn that culture into a new ethical or cultural authority. Instead of establishing new cultural hierarchies to replace the old ones, Zhang preferred juxtaposing different cultural and epistemological models into a relativistic, mutually defining and mutually testing “uneven contrast,” a relativity that challenges certainties of meaning and knowing but has not yet developed into a postmodern flatness.

Finally, humanly speaking, Zhang in her fiction continued with the humanist legacy. But it was a humanism without idealism. Even when Zhang showed that an integrated individual or even a coherent subjectivity is no longer a relevant category for

modern urban humanity, her humanist interest, empathy and sympathy to such humans did not dwindle. Her brand of humanism was also free of utopianism – sometimes she injected elements of the past or elements of the future to prevent the reality principle from being ingrained and settled, but she nevertheless believed that they were not revolutions, only revelations (*qishi*) that might momentarily wake up the modern humans from the passive mimesis of modernity.

For this very reason, Zhang Ailing's work, although brilliantly conceived culturally, aesthetically and epistemologically, might lack the power to bring about real social and ethical changes. Just as we are so ready to claim her as the writer of our time, her limits also speak for the historical moment we live in: after all, the modern period and modern culture will probably be the last we know that was capable of conceiving revolutionary and epochal changes. For better or worse, we are beyond that.

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