

THE SONG OF EVERLASTING SORROW: WANG ANYI'S TALE OF
SHANGHAI

BY

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ABSTRACT

The 2008 publication of the English version of *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow – a Novel of Shanghai*, translated by Michael Berry and Susan Chan Egan, brought some well-deserved attention to Wang Anyi (1954 -), an important contemporary Chinese author who had, hitherto, been relatively unknown among Western readers. Since then, her reputation has grown. This thesis explores the life and writings of Wang Anyi, focusing on her major work, *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow* (1995), which won the author the prestigious Mao Dun literary award in China. The novel is an attempt to capture the spirit of the city of Shanghai over a span of more than four decades. It focuses primarily on the life story of Wang Qiyao, a former Miss Shanghai, who embodies the values and represents the changes undergone by the city during a turbulent time in its history. One of the aims of this paper is to analyze the subtextual meaning of “the everlasting sorrow” of the title, an understanding of which is, in fact, critical to the complete understanding of the story. In addition, the thesis also aims to unravel the myth surrounding the literary ties between the famous *Shanghai Style* Chinese author Zhang Ailing (1920 - 1995) and the younger Wang Anyi. By tracing the origin of the book title, *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, and focusing on the central message of the book, the thesis argues that the subtextual meaning of the title cannot possibly refer to what the protagonist of the book feels regarding her life, but rather refers to the author’s feelings of sorrow as she contemplates the fate of Shanghai in the face of the growing materialism of the twentieth century. The thesis also focuses on an analytical study of Zhang Ailing’s novella, *Sealed Off* (1943), comparing it with Wang Anyi’s, *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, and concludes that, although there may be some superficial similarities between the two writers, in the end, Wang Anyi’s literary background, her attitude

toward writing and her style are simply too different from Zhang Ailing's own for Wang to be considered Zhang's "Shanghai Style" heir apparent.

Chapter One:

Wang Anyi's Life and Writings

Wang Anyi (王安忆) is a contemporary Chinese writer who started her writing career from a humble short story, *The Rain Patters On*, which was published in 1980. After three decades of diligent work, Wang has established herself as one of China's most prolific, original and influential fiction writers. She has penned three dozen volumes of fiction and essays and has won numerous literary awards in China, Hong Kong and Taiwan. In 2000, she was awarded China's highest literary honor, the Mao Dun Literature Prize (*Mao Dun wenxuejiang* 茅盾文学奖)¹, which is given only once in every five years. Despite her growing reputation, Wang Anyi remains as one of most low-key figures on China's literary stage.

This thesis is a critical study of Wang's seminal work, *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow* (*Changhen ge* 长恨歌, 1995), the book was awarded the Mao Dun Prize. The novel spans four decades, from the 1940s to the 1980s, in the life of a Shanghai woman making a living in an ever-changing society of China marked by the constant ups and downs of historical tides. Aided by the emergence of growing nostalgia in the 1990s toward the bygone era of Shanghai, *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow* was in due course warmly embraced by readers and media companies alike, and has been adapted into a television drama series, a play, and a film. Nonetheless, these adaptations of the novel run the risk of sensationalizing the life of our

¹ The Mao Dun Literature Prize is a prize for novels administered by the Chinese Writers' Association (CWA). It is one of most prestigious literature prizes in China. It was first awarded in 1982. The prize was created by the will of Mao Dun (茅盾), a prominent Chinese novelist in the 20th century. The purpose was to encourage fiction writing. Eligible for the prize were novels written by Chinese citizens and published in mainland China; the prize was usually given to several writers every five years.

protagonist, the somewhat enigmatic former Miss Shanghai, and downplaying the central message of the book that the author had originally intended for her readers. Is this a story about a former Miss Shanghai, the ill-fated beauty? Or is this a story of Shanghai, the great city? What exactly does the “everlasting sorrow” of the book title mean? Is Wang Anyi truly the successor of Zhang Ailing’s widely celebrated Shanghai style literature? Finally, what does this novel reveal about Wang Anyi, a major writer of contemporary Chinese literature? By analyzing the novel, *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, and her other fictional works, surveying a range of scholarship on Wang’s fiction writing, and contemplating the author’s own words, this thesis attempts to understand and uncover the underlying meaning of this influential work of modern Chinese literature, evaluate the author as a key figure on the Chinese literary stage, and ultimately answer the questions that are raised above.

First, let us begin with a brief biography of the author. Wang Anyi was born in 1954 in Nanjing to a family of intellectuals. Her mother, Ru Zhijuan (1925-1998), an author of well-received short stories including *Lilies* (*Bai he hua* 百合花) and *The Tall White Poplars* (*Gao gao de bai yangshu* 高高的白杨树), was well established in Chinese literary circles of the Maoist period (1942-1979). Her father, Wang Xiaoping (1919-2003), was a noted dramatist and a theatrical director. Shortly after she was born, the family moved to her mother’s native city of Shanghai, which she has called home ever since. As Wang Anyi recalled fondly in her writing, she is a through and through Shanghainess who was raised in a lane off Shanghai’s most prestigious and wealthiest thoroughfare, Huaihai Road.

When she reached twelve years old in 1966, the Cultural Revolution swept through the streets of Shanghai. In a short essay titled “We Were Twelve” (*Na nian women shi er sui* 那年

我们十二岁), she recalled her first encounter with the Cultural Revolution on the busy streets of Shanghai during which she and her young schoolmates tried to intimidate an adult woman by accusing her of wearing a pair of pants with legs a size too wide. However, the episode had an unexpected turn when the accused woman suddenly gained the upper hand in the cruel game by condemning her accusers with the exact same charge. The author wrote that a sense of humiliation and a shaken-up ego left a lasting impression of the “street revolution” of 1966.² When she graduated from junior high school in 1969, she was unable to continue her education because her father had been condemned as a Rightist when Wang Anyi was only three years old. In 1970, at the age of 16, she joined millions of “Urban Youth” (*zhiqing* 知青)³ and eagerly set out to the countryside, bolstered by a strong desire to be independent. Her parents carefully arranged everything and managed to have her sent to the countryside in Wuhe County, Anhui Province. There, a mutual friend of her parents was the vice-mayor of the county so that she could be looked after by him while being thousands of miles from her family in Shanghai.

The extreme poverty, lack of privacy and monotonous lifestyle in the countryside took a great toll on the young Wang Anyi. She soon grew restless and despondent with her new life in the countryside and began a desperate and frenzied pursuit of opportunities in the effort to return to the city. She realized that her rudimentary training in music could be the key in an age where “Propaganda/Modern Opera” (*yangban xi* 样板戏)⁴ was all the rage, whose performing troupes occupied one of the few shiny sectors of employment in an otherwise much depressed economy. She began earnest long hours of practice fueled by her now burning desire to leave the

² Wang Anyi 王安忆, *Jiejin Shiji Chu* [Entering Into the New Century] 接近世纪初 (Zhejiang: Zhejiang wenyi chubanshe, 1998), 7.

³ “*Zhiqing*” refers to millions of urban youth that were sent down to the countryside during the Cultural Revolution.

⁴ “*Yang ban xi*” refers to the style of modern opera that was championed by Chairman Mao’s wife Jiang Qing. It is often patriotic in nature.

countryside once and for all. After a series of setbacks applying for various performing troupes, she managed to get a position as a cellist in Jiangsu province with the Xuzhou Performing Arts Troupe in 1973. Yet, Shanghai remained hundreds of miles away and her unhappiness soon multiplied. In her youthful naiveté, she blamed all the faults and sufferings of the age on the physical distance between her and Shanghai, and believed that returning to Shanghai was the panacea to cure all her problems. In Xuzhou, she put all her efforts into applying for positions that would place her nearer Shanghai and was finally reassigned there in 1978. Somewhat ironically, her reassignment did not result from her efforts but was based on the fact that her parents had no adult children to care for them in Shanghai.

While Wang Anyi started out as a musician, she confessed that she did not care for music and that to her music was merely a way of survival. Clearly, she wanted most to write. She disclosed in her essay that she was much like numerous youths of her generation who secretly aspired to the grandiose dream of becoming writers. She started writing a journal, even when she was physically and mentally drained by living in the countryside. Soon she discovered that writing had become a perfect outlet of self-expression, and keeping a journal was soon replaced by writing short fiction. She had begun publishing a few short stories in the mid-1970s while working for the Xuzhou Performing Troupe. This ultimately led her to her first literary job, working as an editor for the children's magazine *Childhood* upon her return to Shanghai in 1978. The year of 1980 was significant for Wang in terms of coming into her own as a writer. Her short story *And the Rain Patters On* (*Yu, sha sha sha* 雨, 沙沙沙) was published with accolades in *Beijing Literature*. Suddenly, she was viewed as an upcoming young talent. In the same year, she became a member of the Chinese Association of Writers.

And the Rain Patters On was much like her early writings, filled with the heartbroken sentimentality of coming-of-age girls. The author was adept at depicting tender unfulfilled love with details and nuances of rich emotion. Her words were carefully chosen to be poetic and moving. In retrospect, the piece was significant mostly due to the fact that it launched her career as a promising young writer. In commenting on her early stage of writings, one critic wrote, “These works have the emerald freshness and brightness of a landscape after rain. They are songs of an innocent young girl, poured out from the depth of her soul.”⁵ Meanwhile, other critics noticed a more substantial side her to her writings. She called attention to the daily experiences of common people, their subjective perspectives, and personal inspirations. Her narrative did not readily fit into the dominant literary style of the time that centered on collective and often heroic experiences that were politically validated and endorsed by the state. In this vein, her writings showed the influence of other women writers in the early post-Mao era such as Zhang Jie (张洁 1937-), whose writings depicted individual experiences, pursuit of ideals, and private feelings.⁶ Generally speaking, the world Wang Anyi created in her early writings was often pure, poetic and idealistic, very reflective of her subject’s personal perspectives and ideals, and especially appealing to young readers.

Once she started publishing, her creativity seemed to be inexhaustible. In 1980, she attended a five-month workshop held by the Chinese Association of Writers in Beijing and completed ten more short stories, which were later collected in her first book published at the end of same year. This experience afforded her rare opportunities to collaborate with well-established writers such as Ye Xin (叶辛 1949 -) and Jiang Zilong (蒋子龙 1941 -). To a

⁵ Ying Bian, *The Time Is Not Yet Ripe: Contemporary China's Best Writers and Their Stories* (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1991), 218.

⁶ Wang Lingzhen, "Re-theorizing the Personal: Identity, Writing and Gender in Yu Luojin's Autobiographical Act," *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 6, no. 2 (1998): 403.

fledgling young author, their encouragement went a long way in boosting her confidence as a writer. One thing to be sure, she kept writing and writing, such that only a year later, in 1982, her second book was published. The novel *Lapse of Time* (*Liu shi* 流逝) won the prize for Best Novelette of 1982. It marked yet another milestone for Wang as a writer who continued to shape her distinct voice. Her characters were no longer confined to coming-of-age young girls. Instead, her gaze was drawn to common people who struggled through their daily lives. In this novella, her main protagonist emerged as the unlikely source of strength who managed to hold her family together during the trying times of the Cultural Revolution. The protagonist's transformation was particularly powerful given her previously privileged and sheltered upbringing. In contrast, the once all commanding and resourceful husband and father-in-law grew weaker and became more dependent on her as the family fortune became depleted. Wang's prose maintained its usual elegance and richness of detail, but as the famed Chinese woman writer Bing Xin (冰心 1900-1999) acknowledged, it was the "probing" quality of her work and her quick growth as a maturing writer that most commanded people's notice.

In 1983, Wang Anyi and her writer mother flew from China to the United States to participate in an international writers' workshop at the University of Iowa. The trip was the first of many overseas trips in her prolific writing career, and it seemed to have left an indelible impression on her. During the trip, they also had extensive contact with writers from both Hong Kong and Taiwan. Upon returning to China, mother and daughter published a joint book titled *Mother and Daughter's Joint Voyage to America* (*Munü tongyou meilijian* 母女同游美丽坚, 1986) detailing their experiences in America written in the form of a journal. It is no exaggeration to say that she experienced a cultural shock in America, which ultimately "led to the profound discovery that she was indeed Chinese and to the decision to 'write on China' when

she returned.”⁷ In other words, the trip seemed to at least partially crystallize the idea of who she was as testified by her own words, “when I went into the world and saw how huge it was and how numerous are its inhabitants, only then did I have a slightly more accurate sense of who I was.”⁸ These experiences and changes eventually culminated in an award-winning novella, *Bao Town* (*Xiaobao zhuang* 小鲍庄, 1985). The work energized the literary scene and was hailed as one of most representative works of the school of fiction known as “searching-for-roots” literature (*xungen wenxue* 寻根文学). As such, the work represented yet another new direction for her writings, and it firmly established Wang Anyi as a maturing, self-transforming, and triumphant writer in her own right. If there was any reservation in the past about whether her work might owe something to the success of her mother, the publishing of *Bao Town* finally helped to erase the doubt.

The novella *Bao Town* is set in a faraway and impoverished village that at once recalls a mythical and changeless China in which traditional values of Confucian teachings continue to govern villagers’ lives. At least on the surface, the inhabitants of Bao village strive to uphold the Confucian ideal of “benevolence and righteousness” (*renyi* 仁义) as exemplified by a young child named Laozha (捞渣), who heroically sacrificed his young life in saving an old man from a horrific flood. Against this image of bucolic tranquility and moral stability, a somewhat hideous and ruthless picture of real life in the Bao village emerges as its dwellers continue to expose their unsightly yet real disposition as insular, selfish, prejudiced and cruel people in the face of extreme poverty and ignorance. The death of the little Laozha symbolizes the end of the Confucian ideal of “benevolence and righteousness,” and the onset of a very different way of life

⁷ Yi-tsi Mei Feuerwerker, *Ideology, Power, Text: Self-Representation and the Peasant "Other" in Modern Chinese Literature* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1998), 227.

⁸ Ying, *The Time Is Not Yet Ripe*, 223.

chosen by the villagers. Critic Edward Gunn argues that her writing resists “the rationalized interpretations of society promoted by modern ideologies defining nation-state.”⁹ This echoes Wang’s disinterest in following the tradition of “socialist realism” that emphasizes literature’s role toward the betterment of society by portraying the proletariat in a realistic, optimistic and heroic way. These works of “socialist realism” often result in creating typical characters under typical conditions. Indeed, different parts of the story in *Bao Town* soon present readers with competing voices that refuse to converge and provide predictable and definitive conclusions. Wang remarked about her work, “There are many characters in the story, and each of them has his/her tale. The large story triggers many smaller ones and the smaller ones complete the larger narrative.”¹⁰

While *Bao Town* brought Wang Anyi near unanimous admiration from critics and the public readers alike, her now famed "romance trilogy" (*sanlian* 三恋) published in 1986-1987 proved to be somewhat controversial given the nature of her theme. In each volume, Wang Anyi explores female sexuality and marriage from multiple standpoints. It was noticed that, “In these works, Wang’s unusually bold depictions of sexual desire and experience offended conservative critics but was welcomed by others as a sign marking the evolution of literary ideas and the progress of society.”¹¹ The first of the trilogy, *Love on a Barren Mountain* (*Huangshan zhi lian* 荒山之恋, 1986), features a romance between two adulterous lovers who tragically end their lives in a suicide pact. The second of the series, *Love in a Small Town* (*Xiaocheng zhi lian*, 小城

⁹ Edward Gunn, *Rewriting Chinese: Style and Innovation in Twentieth-century Chinese Prose* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 176.

¹⁰ Wang Anyi 王安忆, “Wo xie xiaobao zhuang,” [I write *Bao Town*] 我写小鲍庄, *Guangming ribao* [Guangming Daily], August 15, 1985.

¹¹ Ma Yue, “The Catastrophe Remembered by the Non-Traumatic: Counternarratives on the Cultural Revolution in Chinese Literature of the 1990s” (PhD diss., University of Texas, Austin, 2004), 60.

之恋 1986), depicts a volatile and destructive relationship between two adolescents blindly driven by their awakening libidinal desires, ending with the female experiencing a strange sense of liberation only after becoming a single mother. The final one, *Brocade Valley (Jinxiugu zhi lian)* 锦绣谷之恋, 1987), paints a portrait of a young married woman who felt passionless and suffocated in her marriage, only to be saved by a brief extramarital affair with a writer during her short escapade away from home. It has been noted that the work shows signs of influence from Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, one of Wang's favorite novels, by revisiting the old adultery plot of *Madame Bovary*, but in *Brocade Valley* the heroine is more intelligent and self-aware than Flaubert's Emma Bovary. Echoing *Madame Bovary* indirectly, Wang Anyi's novel rewrites the nineteenth-century French novel by placing the heroine in an authorial position.¹²

In 1989, Wang kept up her prolific and successful writing career by publishing another popular short story entitled "Brothers" (*Dixiongmen* 弟兄们). The brothers in her novella are not actual brothers but three females who have sworn brotherhood during their college years. The subject of the story explores the depth of female friendship, showing what draws girls to each other, only to drive them apart. In "Brothers", their profound friendship for each other eventually becomes diluted and fizzles under the demands of women's roles as wife and mother.

As the last decade of the twentieth century drew to a close, Wang Anyi began to experiment with metafiction, paying particular attention to the relationship between reality and fiction in her works. In a way, this reflected her growing interest and awareness concerning the form of storytelling and art of "crafting fiction." In a nutshell, "Wang Anyi probes into

¹² Lydia H. Liu, "Invention and Intervention: The Making of a Female Tradition in Modern Chinese Literature," in *Chinese Femininities/Chinese Masculinities: A Reader*, eds. Susan Brownell and Jeffrey Wasserstrom (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 159.

questions regarding the intrinsic logic and technique of storytelling, as well as the nature and status of literature in contemporary China.”¹³ Beginning with the third book of the “romance trilogy”, *Brocade Valley*, her experimentation with metafiction had already become evident. A narrator “I” opens the book by saying, “I want to tell a story, a story about a woman.” As the story develops, the narrator continues to intervene by interjecting comments and observations but refrains from talking for the characters. Continuing this trend, Wang published a critically acclaimed short story entitled “Uncle’s Story” (*Shushu de gushi*叔叔的故事, 1990). Adhering to the standard structure of metafiction, the novella is about writing a story about story writing that is then narrated in the voice of a younger writer who has recently experienced an undisclosed personal misfortune. At the center of the story is the now celebrated “my uncle,” an older generation writer who sought to reconstruct his life after spending decades living in the countryside as a Rightist, but eventually discovered that there was no way to escape his past and finally realized that he was not to be happy anymore.

In the 1990s Wang also looked back to her past and her family ancestry by publishing several works which combined part-mythology, part-historical fact, part-personal account and part-fantasy. *Records and Fictions* (*Jishi yu xugou*纪实与虚构, 1993) attempts to reconstruct the maternal side of her family past, relying both on meticulously researched facts and fabricated materials. In 1995, Wang published her most celebrated work, *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, about the life of a Miss Shanghai beauty pageant winner, Wang Qiyao, and her life before and after the new China of 1949. With this work, she became the winner of the prestigious Fifth Mao Dun Literature Award. The book was also voted as one of the most influential works of the

¹³ Joshua S. Mostow and Kirk A. Denton, eds., *The Columbia Companion to Modern East Asian Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 595.

nineties in China. In her in depth analysis of Chinese literature in the 1990s, Zhang Jingyuan writes, “The best of the 1990s writers in my view is Wang Anyi, from Shanghai.”¹⁴

Wang has continued to write short essays, travel writings, literary criticism, and memoirs while regularly publishing major works of fiction as one of China’s most productive contemporary writers. In 2001, Wang was elected chairperson of the Shanghai Writers’ Association and has been occupying the post ever since. Meanwhile, she seems to have succeeded in maintaining a low profile. Writer Chen Cun offers a vivid sketch of her daily life: “Wang Anyi says that she lives the life of a peasant. She gets up early and goes to bed early. She spends mornings writing. But nights, she always accompanies her father for dinner. She keeps at it every day. To do the same thing day after day is hard. Only she has managed it. Journalists always ask what she is up to lately. One does not need to guess. She is writing her novel, day after day, a passage at a time. She writes at will and stops at will. She has simply surpassed others in her way of doing things.”¹⁵ She also survives the pushing and shoving of crowds in buses to her teaching job in the literature department of Fudan University, where she personally advises graduate students. In summing up Wang Anyi as a novelist and her standing in the Chinese tradition of fiction writing, Chen Cun offers this insight, “I think she is perhaps the last of the novelists. There is not going to be another one who writes fiction like she does. In

¹⁴ Zhang Jingyuan, “Breaking Open: Chinese Women’s Writing in the Late 1980s and 1990s,” in *Chinese Literature in the Second Half of a Modern Century: a Critical Survey*, eds. Pang-yuan Chi and David Der-wei Wang (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 174.

¹⁵ Chen Cun 陈村, “Shuo dian Wang Anyi” [Talking about Wang Anyi] 说点王安忆, *Fiction Periodical* [Xiaoshuo xuan kan] 小说选刊, January, 2001, <http://www.people.com.cn/GB/wenju/66/134/20010212/393434.html>.

this aspect, her fiction, *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, certainly, *can* be read as elegy of the death of novel.”¹⁶

¹⁶ Chen Cun, “Shuo dian Wang anyi”. In the article, Chen Cun expresses his view that the death of novel is approaching, and there are few novelists who still labor like Wang Anyi. Apparently, he is referring to the traditional way of fiction writing.

Chapter Two:

The Song of Everlasting Sorrow: Interpreting the Subtextual Meaning of “Everlasting Sorrow” in Wang Anyi’s Tale of Wang Qiyao

A Summary of the Song of Everlasting Sorrow

Before treating the main topic of this chapter, the subtextual meaning of the title *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, let us first summarize the plot of the novel. Wang Anyi’s 1995 novel *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow* (*Changhen ge* 长恨歌), recognized as one of most important Chinese literary works from the 1990s, is tripartite. Spanning forty odd years from 1945 to 1986, the narrative’s main character is Wang Qiyao, a former Miss Shanghai and a later mistress of a powerful bureaucrat of the Nationalist regime who met his early death on the eve of the Nationalist’s defeat by the Communist Party in 1948. Book I is set in the glittery city of Shanghai during the latter half of the 1940s, a few years before the founding of the People’s Republic of China on October 1, 1949. There are four chapters, of which the author devotes the entirety of the first to serve as an overall background for the book. In it, Wang Anyi delineates what to her are the essential elements of the soul of bygone Shanghai: “alleyways” (*longtang* 弄堂), “gossip” (*liuyan* 流言), “the young lady’s bedchamber” (*guige* 闺阁), “pigeons” (*gezi* 鸽子), and Wang Qiyao. For instance, the following paragraph is a moving description of the young lady’s bedchamber from the author:

The bedchamber in a Shanghai *longtang* is a place where anything can happen, where even melancholy is noisy and clamorous. When it drizzles, raindrops write the word “melancholy” on the window. The mist in the back *longtang* is melancholic in an ambiguous way – it unaccountably hastens people along. It nibbles away at the patience she needs to be a daughter, eats away at the fortitude she must have to conduct herself as a woman. It tells her that the arrow is on the bowstring, about to fly, that the gold pin is in the box, and all is ready. Every day is more difficult to endure than the last, but, on

looking back, one rues the shortness of the time. Consequently, one is at a complete loss. The young lady's bedchamber embodies the naiveté of the Shanghai *longtang*, passing in a single night's time from being young and innocent to being worldly and wise, in a nerve-ending cycle, one generation after another. The vestal bedchamber is but a mirage thrown up by the Shanghai *longtang*. When the clouds open to reveal the rising sun, it turns to smoke and mist. The curtain rises and falls, one act follows another, into eternity.¹⁷

Together, these elements of Shanghai she describes are supposed to bring to readers' minds an authentic image of the Shanghai in which millions of Wang Qiyaos live out their destiny. The Wang Qiyao of the first chapter refers to a composite picture of a typical young lady of the Shanghai *longtang*.¹⁸ It is in the midst of these humble alleyways that Wang Qiyao spends her most precious years as a girl, and then again her adulthood as a woman with a certain past. It is also where she eventually loses her life.

If fate had not intervened, Wang Qiyao would be happily settled into the prescribed life of a typical *longtang* girl, who in due course would marry a decent white-collar bank clerk employed by one of the shiny foreign banks situated around the Bund. However, a special visit to a film studio with her school chum at age sixteen proves to be a pivotal point in her life. The experience affords her a profound opportunity to catch a glimpse of the glamorous world which *longtang* girls like her could normally only dream of. The visit introduces her to the world beyond her *longtang*, bringing an abrupt close to her adolescent naiveté. Shortly after, she befriends two persons who would persist throughout her adulthood, a daughter of an industrialist named Jiang Lili (蒋丽丽) and a westernized amateur photographer, Mr. Cheng. With their enthusiastic backing, Wang Qiyao single-mindedly throws herself into the fierce competition of

¹⁷ Wang, Anyi, *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow: a Novel of Shanghai*, trans. Michael Berry and Susan Chan Egan (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 17-18.

¹⁸ Wang, Anyi, *Changhen ge* 长恨歌 [*The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*] (Beijing: Zuoja chubanshe 作家出版社, 1996), 20.

the beauty pageant of Miss Shanghai as the city temporarily chooses to forego the worries of the day: the ongoing civil war between the Chinese Nationalist Party and the Communist Party of China. Instead, it indulges in one of its favorite pastimes, in which Wang Qiyao places third after a fierce contest.

With that success comes the calling of a powerful Nationalist bureaucrat named Director Li (李主任), with whom Wang Qiyao promptly falls in love. With resolute courage, she departs her good-girl life of the *longtang* and readily settles into an altogether different life of being a mistress of a powerful agent of the Nationalist regime. She vanishes from her friends' lives, leaving Mr. Cheng brokenhearted. Behind her seemingly soothing and secluded world of being a mistress, the raging civil war between the Nationalists and the Communists finally comes to an end. Just before defeat, her lover and protector Director Li suddenly dies in a plane crash. With the fall of old Shanghai, a new republic is born under the rule of the Chinese Communist Party.

Along with the fall of Shanghai and the death of Director Li, Wang Qiyao's world in Shanghai collapses into pieces. Book II opens with Wang Qiyao being ferried to her Grandma's quaint hometown feeling deadened and old beyond her tender age. However, the mundane life of the countryside fails to keep her from yearning to return to Shanghai. Again, her life is thrown back into a humble *longtang* apartment. There, after being certified as a nurse, she sets up her home as a clinic administering shots for neighborhood residents. Her polished mannerisms and flawless taste in clothing stand out in this otherwise homely neighborhood and soon piques the interests of two cousins, a rich and idle wife of an ex-capitalist, Mrs. Yan, and Mr. Kang, a son of an old Shanghai family who struggles with his complicated upbringing. Mr. Kang happens to be the son of a concubine but the only male progeny in his conservative family. As the only male progeny, he ends up spending more time with his father's proper wife, whom

he addresses as Mother, than with his own birth mother, whom he addresses as Second Mother. All this has left Mr. Kang feeling uneasy about his place in the family. The three strangers form a quick friendship. While they have plenty of fun times together, and amorous feelings are steadily developing between Wang Qiyao and Mr. Kang, Wang Qiyao's past inevitably comes back to haunt her. In Mrs. Yan's eyes, being with Wang Qiyao merely serves as an attempt to hang onto the illusion of the bygone Shanghai and its good old days. Upon discovering the affair between her cousin and Wang Qiyao, she is outraged and immediately intervenes by breaking the news of Wang's past to her cousin's family. Mr. Kang gives in to his parents' pressure and retreats to his old world, leaving Wang Qiyao despondent, single and pregnant.

With the food rationing and food scarcity of the early 1960s, Wang Qiyao struggles to feed herself. The bad situation is made much worse by the fact that she is pregnant. Unexpectedly, Mr. Cheng bumps into her again with a generous helping hand. Surviving has become the top priority for many in those days, including them; together they strategize each day's meal, riding out the hard times with careful planning. Soon, Wang Qiyao gives birth to a daughter. Over the years, although Mr. Cheng has never wavered in his feelings toward Wang Qiyao, he sadly comes to the conclusion that Wang Qiyao can never entertain the same feelings toward him. With this, he recoils into a reclusive lifestyle after entrusting the task of taking care of Wang Qiyao and her baby daughter to their mutual friend, Jiang Lili.

However, life soon proves to be relentless and cruel. Book II ends with Jiang Lili dying of a horrific cancer and Mr. Cheng committing suicide under the pressure of malicious and fictitious accusations brought on by the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Wang Qiyao is yet again left virtually friendless in the midst of a tough life. Luckily, Shanghai seems to take a pity on her and her daughter, and she emerges largely unscathed by the political storm.

Book III covers the decade of 1976 to 1986 as Shanghai starts to show signs of economic recovery. Wang Qiyao's daughter, born in 1961, turns fifteen years old when Book III opens. The relationship between Wang Qiyao and Weiwei (薇薇) is prickly and fragile, simmering in a stew of bitter jealousy and petty disputes. Much to Wang Qiyao's dismay, her daughter Weiwei turns out to be a direct opposite of her. While the mother is self-possessed and sophisticated, Weiwei possesses none of these charming feminine qualities. Over the years, Wang Qiyao distinguishes herself by relying on her impeccable taste in fashion, but her daughter is virtually undistinguishable from the millions of Shanghai young ladies meandering about the bustling Huaihai thoroughfare. While Wang Qiyao projects herself as a leader of fashion, Weiwei is content to be no more than a follower of fashion. It is not from her daughter, but from her daughter's best school chum Zhang Yonghong (张永红), the most fashionable girl on Huaihai Road in the eighties, that Wang Qiyao finds a close confidante and an admirer. Zhang instantly recognizes Wang's taste in clothing and is drawn to her understated yet elegant glamour. Wang Qiyao also sees traces of her old self in young Zhang Yonghong. Their unusual bond of friendship is quickly sealed by their mutual appreciation for each other despite their age difference.

Wang Qiyao soon gathers a group of like-minded young admirers, who are drawn to her, intrigued by the allure of her enigmatic past. Meanwhile, to Wang Qiyao's delight, Zhang Yonghong's former boyfriend who comes from a solid upper middle class family eventually turns out to be her daughter's ideal husband. He soon weds Weiwei and starts their enviable middle-class life in the USA. Meanwhile, in Shanghai, both Wang Qiyao and Zhang Yonghong suffer setbacks in their love lives. Wang Qiyao becomes enamored with a younger admirer, Old Color (老克蜡), who clings to a nostalgic longing for an "old Shanghai" that he cannot witness

but only imagine. To Old Color, the former Miss Shanghai holds the key to his deep-seated fascination with the past. However, the affair does not last despite Wang Qiyao's best efforts and willingness to sacrifice her last bit of financial security, the gold bars left behind for her by the politician that she has kept untouched all these years. When Old Color fails to show up at the party that she has specially set up as a gesture of conciliation, Wang Qiyao is again forced to swallow the pain of a hopeless relationship.

Ironically, the high-minded and much sought-after Zhang Yonghong ends up with an unlikely boyfriend, a reckless hoodlum nicknamed Long Legs (长脚), who has been busy covering up his own fabricated identity. In his desperate attempt to live up to his claim of being a rich heir-in-waiting of a Hong Kong tycoon, he sneaks into Wang Qiyao's apartment late one night aiming for a big catch. Apparently, like other Shanghainese, he too is enticed by the rumor that Wang Qiyao was left with a sizeable amount of gold before Director Li had been killed. When she adamantly refuses to give up her treasure box, Zhang Yonghong's boyfriend Long Legs strangles Wang Qiyao to death. At that point, he discovers Wang Qiyao is nothing more than an aging and ugly woman, and that the amount of her gold is rather disappointing although better than none at all. Thus, the book ends with Wang Qiyao's final moment on her deathbed, uncannily reproducing the scene of a bedroom murder she had watched forty years ago at the film studio.

Interpreting the Subtextual Meaning of “Everlasting Sorrow” in Wang Anyi’s Tale of Wang Qiyao

Wang Anyi borrowed her title, *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, from one of the most celebrated literary works of the Tang Dynasty, Bai Juyi's (白居易 772-846) epic poem of the

same name, in Chinese *Changhen Ge* (长恨歌). One only needs to peruse her bibliography to realize how uncharacteristic her choice of title is. From her first short novella, *And the Rain Patters On* (*Yu, sha sha sha* 雨, 沙沙沙, 1979), to her more recent work, *Peach Flower in Blossom* (*Tao zhi yao yao* 桃之夭夭, 2004), this is the only book for which she borrows a title from an already existing work. Clearly, this is not her standard practice. In general she seems well aware of the importance of a well-named book. It is said that when she was engrossed in an extensive dialogue with a professor of literary criticism, Zhang Xinying (张新颖), from Fudan University (复旦大学), Wang Anyi pointed out a contemporary of hers whom she considered exemplary in naming his books.¹⁹ That the importance of a book title weighs considerably on her mind is not at all surprising for a writer as scrupulous as she. All things considered, the selection of the title *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow* does not appear to be a random act, but most likely is the result of careful consideration. One cannot help but ponder the obvious question: why did she choose this title? More specifically, how should we, as readers, approach the meaning of “everlasting sorrow”? How is the meaning of “everlasting sorrow” related to the content of the novel? As the reader immerses himself in the world of Wang Qiyao, he starts to probe deeper, either consciously or subconsciously, into the meaning of “everlasting sorrow”. After all, as Michael Berry, the English translator of her book points out, the title, “forms the single most important subtext to the novel.”²⁰ Although Berry does not elaborate on what that subtext might be, it would not be an exaggeration to say that it holds a key to understanding the novel in its entirety, at least from the author’s standpoint.

¹⁹ Wang Anyi and Zhang Xinying 王安忆和张新颖, *Tanhua lu* 谈话录 [*Our Conversations*] (Guilin: Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe, 2008), 246. While discussing writer Su Tong, Wang Anyi points out Su Tong’s unusual talent in naming his novels.

²⁰ Wang, *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, 437.

To review her other titles, generally Wang Anyi's titles rarely give her readers much pause in deciphering their meanings. They are often self-explanatory and therefore free of ambiguity. For instance, *Lapse of Time* (*Liushi*流逝, 1982), literally and figuratively points out and explores the fleeting nature of time and its apparent impact on the protagonist. *Da Liu Town* (*Da liu zhuang*大刘庄, 1985) and *Bao Town* (*Xiao bao zhuang*小鲍庄, 1985) are both place names where focal stories take place. In many other cases, Wang Anyi directly entitles her books with their central characters' names, such as *Mi Ni* (米尼, 1991), *Fu Ping* (富萍, 2001), and *Mei Tou* (妹头, 2001). Her now celebrated "romance trilogy," published between 1986-1987, *Love in a Small Town* (*Xiaocheng zhi lian* 小城之恋, 1986), *Love in a Barren Mountain* (*Huangshan zhi lian*荒山之恋, 1986), and *Love in a Brocade Valley* (*Jinxiugu zhi lian* 锦绣谷之恋, 1987), explicitly points out the central theme connecting the series: love. One of her latest book titles, *Peach Flower in Blossom* (*Tao zhi yao yao* 桃之夭夭, 2004), adopts a line from the Chinese classic, *The Book of Odes* (*Shi jing*诗经), clearly alluding to the loveliness of the young protagonist. Relatively speaking, the meaning of the title of her more recent work, *Heroes in Every Corner* (*Bian di xiaoxiong*遍地枭雄, 2005), appears to be somewhat abstract in comparison. It uses the four-word idiom, *Bian di xiao xiong*, evocative of martial art stories, implying that heroes can be discovered in the most unlikely of places. From this last title it is not easy to predict just what the story will be about. However, it quickly makes sense upon reading the novel, and in the book's epilogue, Wang Anyi clearly explains what it refers to, giving readers no room to stray from her intended meaning.²¹

²¹ Wang, Anyi, *Biandi xiaoxiong* [Heros in Every Corner] 遍地枭雄 (Shanghai: Wenhui chubanshe, 2005), 243.

Thus, it appears in *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow* that Wang Anyi purposefully withholds from her readers the pleasure of comprehending the meaning of the title as soon as they start the book. In fact, even upon finishing the novel, one does not find the anticipated satisfaction of finally arriving at an unambiguous answer. Readers are left with a lingering doubt as to whether they have properly digested and understood the story. Curious readers might begin to entertain the thought that the epic poem from which the title was originally drawn could shed some light on the matter. However, they soon meet with a rather sobering fact: connecting the dots between the Wang Anyi's book and the epic poem is not a simple task. The truth is, although Bai Juyi's (772-846) epic poem, *Changhen Ge*, is universally known by Chinese readers, there is no consensus on its interpretation. On the contrary, scholars and common readers alike have all long debated the meaning of "everlasting sorrow", as well as Bai's discreetly veiled position toward the very romance he described so movingly in the poem. On a superficial level, Bai's portrayal of Yang Guifei's stunning beauty has been so widely accepted and so eagerly circulated that the romance itself has become legendary in Chinese people's minds, much aided by the popularity of the poem.

Despite the challenge, in an attempt to arrive at the possible underlying meaning of Wang Anyi's title, we as readers are compelled to take a closer look at Bai Juyi's poem. Written in 809 A.D., during a period when the powerful Tang Dynasty (唐朝) was already undergoing rapid decline, *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow* traces the legend of the emperor Xuanzong (玄宗 685-762) and his favorite consort Yang Guifei (杨贵妃 719-756). Beginning with the first two lines, Bai depicts an emperor who has become consumed by a desire to obtain the finest beauty in the kingdom. The poem goes on to describe how an astonishingly beautiful Lady Yang is, as if in answer to his prayer. After she is selected to live in the palace, the passionate emperor lavishes

her with undivided attention and affords her special privileges, which are also generously extended to her large circle of kin. This eventually leads to the emperor's dereliction in matters of state, and Lady Yang's family's speedy and spectacular ascent to power and wealth. In the wake of a full-scale rebellion and growing unrest, the emperor is pressured to order the execution of his favorite consort in order to avert the collapse of the Tang dynasty. The final section of the poem describes a grief-stricken emperor deep in mourning and consumed by his futile quest to be with her again even after death. In apparent anguish, the poem closes with the famous couplet, "While even heaven and earth will one day come to an end, this everlasting sorrow shall endure."

To be sure, the final two lines deliver a heart-wrenching lament that appears to be most revealing of the poet's state of mind. They also appear to be the most cited and memorable lines from the poem. Sentimental lovers often quote the lines as the proof of their undying love for each other. Scholars view these two lines as the potential gateway to the much-veiled meaning of the poem, and, consequently, raise numerous questions based upon them. Is it Yang Guifei's "everlasting sorrow"? Or is it the Emperor Xuanzong's? Or is it a sorrow deeply felt by the author himself? Finally, what is the precise meaning of the sorrow in the poem? Over the years, readers and scholars alike have tried to extract the most historically accurate interpretation of the meaning of "everlasting sorrow," one that they assume might be closest to what Bai Juyi may have had in mind. Generally, there are three camps. One camp believes that Bai Juyi intended the poem to satirize Emperor Xuanzong's infatuation with female beauty. The satirical quality of the poem was recognized in Tang dynasty scholar Tang Ruxun's (唐汝询) *Tang Poetry Commentary* (*Tang shi jie* 唐诗解), and further attention was called to this interpretation by other

eminent scholars from subsequent dynasties.²² Another camp, represented by 12th century scholar Zhang Banji, holds that the poem merely recounts the legendary romance between Emperor Xuanzong and his favorite consort Yang Guifei.²³ To yet a third camp, both interpretations seem equally valid. Not only was the poet critical of the emperor's rapture over Yang Guifei and his slavery to her sexual appeal and its direct impact on the Tang Dynasty's downfall, he was also, paradoxically, awed by their spectacular love story. It is likely that this opinion was partly influenced by the sublime tone of Bai Juyi's forty-line lavish description of the romance, a tone that is carried throughout the long poem.

Zhou Tian (周天), a contemporary Chinese scholar, was so taken by the poem that he spent years researching and studying the poet and his works. In his book dedicated to the *Changhen Ge* and its author, Zhou Tian emphasizes that the poem should be interpreted according to its proper historical time frame. He argues that the "everlasting sorrow" in the poem could not be coming from Yang Guifei, nor from the emperor. Instead the "everlasting sorrow" could only be coming from the poet himself, who regretted that the emperor was a captive of corporal desire and thus hastened the decline of the dynasty. The poet, who was also a prominent politician, believed that when such desire becomes unchecked, it leads to the neglect of the state and the welfare of its people, and hence to the loss of the Mandate of Heaven.²⁴ In short, the patriotic author uses the poem to serve as a dire warning to emperors-to-come. This reading seems to be most plausible given the content of the poem and that of Bai Juyi's other extensive works such as the satirical poem, *The Elderly Charcoal Seller* (*Mai tan weng* 卖炭翁).

²² Zhang, Zhongyu 张中宇, "Changhen ge zhuti yanjiu zonglun [A Summary of 'Changhen ge's Main Themes]," <<长恨歌>>主题研究综论, *Wenxue yichan* 文学遗产 [Literary Heritage], no. 3 (2005): 145.

²³ Zhang, Banji 张邦基, *Mo zhuang man lu* [Notes of Mo Zhuang] 墨庄漫录 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2002), 177.

²⁴ Zhou Tian 周天, "Changhen ge" *Jianshuo gao* [Writings about Changhen ge] <<长恨歌>>笺说稿 (Xian: Shanxi renmin chubanshe, 1983), 105.

In fact, it is unlikely that Bai Juyi, both as a deeply patriotic but disillusioned politician and a well-established poet, would write a poem merely because of the spectacular allure of the romance, without imbuing the poem with a more significant meaning.

Indeed, on closer reading, one notices that this central message has been developing all along. Starting with the very first line and continuing to the end, Bai Juyi builds up an image of a failing emperor who starts from merely entertaining a blissful fantasy of owning the finest beauty in the kingdom to realizing his dream and ultimately being consumed and destroyed by unchecked sexual obsession. Ironically, on the surface, readers might feel that the romance between the emperor and his consort is poignant and awe-inspiring, feelings that are aided by the poem's expressive and artful language. Nonetheless, all along, Bai Juyi is laying down another more sobering layer that has to do with the gradual and fatal decline of the state and its people. In fact, the poet does not miss a single chance to contrast these two lines of development. The more extravagant the romance becomes, the more precarious and imperiled the fate of the country. At the climactic moment, these two lines of development crash head-on and Yang Guifei's execution becomes both the only solution that can resolve conflicts and the only way to quell the simmering rebellion that is likely to end the once glorious dynasty. In addition, this dramatic confrontation results in the emperor's being relegated to the position of a mere puppet in his son's government. If anything, the poet seems to be building up the perfect storm, which might finally shake the emperor to the core and wake him from his intoxicating and all-consuming dream. As it turns out, the drastic result, her infamous death and his reduction to a puppet, fail to bring him back to the path of a righteous emperor. To the poet's dismay, the emperor's obsession now borders on insanity: He acts as if he is still possessed by the now dead Consort Yang Guifei. He continues to immerse himself in a series of bizarre quests to reach her

in the afterworld, all to no avail, yet all the while vowing his unending love for her. Upon reflecting on the tragic history that marks the dramatic decline of the once magnificent dynasty, Bai Juyi, as a poet and politician who cares deeply for his country, cannot help but lament in the last two lines his “everlasting sorrow” over the blindness of Emperor Xuanzong while, at the same time, expressing his hope that such a lesson should be heeded by future emperors.

Returning now to Wang Anyi’s novel *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, questions arise. Is “everlasting sorrow” a lament from the protagonist Wang Qiyao, or is it a lament from the author? Most importantly, what is the lament really about? The reading of the original poem from which the novel’s title was borrowed makes at least one thing quite apparent: the meaning of “everlasting sorrow” cannot be directly transferred from the parent poem to the title of the novel. Many readers might have assumed that the “everlasting sorrow” in Wang Anyi’s book title is a lament coming from the protagonist Wang Qiyao before reaching a more in depth understanding of the novel. However, our interpretation of the epic poem certainly helps to highlight the very possibility that the “everlasting sorrow” in the novel’s title could well be a lament originating from the author herself. From this standpoint, Michael Berry’s assessment that the title underscores the single most important subtext to the novel seems to be quite reasonable. To begin with, the author went through a prolonged time of consideration before settling on this title. Furthermore, she broke with her norm by borrowing a title from an existing and well-known literary work. In retrospect, it probably isn’t at all coincidental that she chose Bai Juyi’s most famous title for her arguably most ambitious work to date. Not unlike the literary giant who came before her, to some degree Wang Anyi possesses what in Chinese is called an “anxiety consciousness” (*youhuan yishi* 忧患意识), which, using Wang Jing’s words, is a “Confucian humanist heritage -- that nourished generations of Chinese literati in a

compulsive desire to play the role of political missionaries and commentators.”²⁵ They feel compelled to utilize their works to illuminate a point or make a statement in the hopes of enlightening their fellow countrymen, a responsibility they take seriously out of a patriotic spirit of loyalty to their country. Bai Juyi could not overtly criticize the government that he had been serving, but still he must have felt it was his duty to offer his poem as a warning to future emperors to avoid an inglorious downfall like that of Xuanzong. In the same vein, Wang Anyi, like generations of literati who share the anxiety consciousness, takes up her pen to paint a picture of Shanghai with a sobering message in mind, warning her fellow Shanghainese about the less than desirable direction that the city is heading into. The novel is a strong response from a writer who is appalled by the recent development in Shanghai as it single-mindedly pursues the dream of increasing material prowess while neglecting the need for spiritual contemplation. Alas, Wang Qiyao’s life story illustrates that as Shanghai again recovers and prospers, the warmth of human relationship is continuously diluted by an obsession with material needs. By adopting the title, Wang Anyi strives to convey her strong distaste, profound regret, and unshakable sense of melancholy about the rampant consumerism that emerged as the major theme in the modern development of Shanghai. This is perhaps most apparent in her discussion of *FuPing*, another story centered around Shanghai, viz.: “I really don’t like the society we have today. It is obsessed by squandering, reckless squandering, squandering of time, materials, life, squandering of feelings and spirit.”²⁶ So when she sat down to write another book concerning Shanghai, it

²⁵ Wang Jing, ed. *China's Avant-Garde Fiction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 2.

²⁶ Xiao Jiwei, “Can She Say No to Zhang Ailing? Detail, Idealism and Woman in Wang Anyi’s Fiction,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 17, no. 56 (2008): 522.

was not surprising that it came out as a song of everlasting sorrow, sung by an ill-fated beauty, both elegiac and dark to its core.

Indeed, this story of Shanghai is woven through the ebb and flow of Wang Qiyao's life. However, it would do a disservice to the author if her book were perceived as nothing more than a trendy and moving story of an ill-fated beauty set in a by-gone era of Shanghai. Following the mode of popular fiction, readers may assume that the "everlasting sorrow" comes straight from the protagonist's heart-wrenching and unfulfilled love affairs. This is hardly so. Just as Bai Juyi and many writers have done before her, Wang Anyi's literary exercise inevitably contains a much more sobering subtext. The "everlasting sorrow" is indeed a heartfelt lament from the author herself after seeing her beloved home city Shanghai transform itself into China's new capital of material wealth while leaving no room for the self-contemplation or soul-searching that is sorely needed at a time of hyper economic development. By directing her gaze at Shanghai and its precarious fate over an eventful forty-year span, the author intends to issue a dire warning about the city's future.

In a departure from her customary approach, the author purposefully delays the introduction of the protagonist Wang Qiyao until the beginning of chapter two. Reminiscent of Victor Hugo's opening of *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*, in which he devotes significant passages to describing a bird's-eye view of Paris, Wang Anyi devotes an entire chapter to an expansive description of Shanghai, the grand background in which the heroine Wang Qiyao lives her life.²⁷ Even more remarkably, Wang Anyi focuses her lenses on some of the often-neglected yet essential elements of the city: Shanghai's alleyways, gossip, the young lady's bedchamber,

²⁷ Wang Anyi, *Wang Anyi shuo* [Wang Anyi Talks] 王安忆说 (Hunan: Hunan wenyi chubanshe, 2003), 206. In the article entitled "Wang Anyi talks" (Wang Anyi shuo 王安忆说), Wang Anyi discusses the similarities between *The Everlasting Sorrow* and Victor Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*.

pigeons, and Wang Qiyao herself. From these descriptions her readers are sure to be impressed with her keen sense of observation and her kaleidoscopic portrayal of Shanghai's everyday sights, sounds and residents. Make no mistake about it: Wang Qiyao is not a single individual but a composite of typical girls of the Shanghai *longtang*, young girls from middle class or lower-middle class families who are fashion conscious and highly attuned to material comfort. The author refrains from prematurely focusing on a single individual's life throughout the first chapter. Rather, she painstakingly delineates an elaborate picture of Shanghai with the elements that she considers to be most essential to the spirit of the city of Shanghai as seen through a true insider's eyes. In this sense, Wang Qiyao could well be anybody from the vast and interconnected network of *longtang* in which millions of young ladies lead largely uneventful but nonetheless protected lives. In other words, rather than merely treating her protagonist as another ill-fated beauty, the author seems to value her allegorical weight, thus using her as a medium through which Shanghai as a city is transformed into flesh and bone. Indeed, on several occasions, the author has spoken candidly about the role of Wang Qiyao, "I wrote about a woman's fate. In reality, she is just a symbol of Shanghai. What I intended to write is a story of the city."²⁸ Referring to the same point in her conversation with literary critic Wang Xueying (王雪瑛), she points out that she succeeded in making Wang the symbol of Shanghai, though she admits that she was not able to free her and let her soar. Overall, she considers her portrayal of the protagonist Wang Qiyao not bad (*bu cuo* 不错), but not great either.²⁹ Nevertheless, one needs to recognize the book as a tale of tragic and beautiful Shanghai rather than a tale of a tragic and beautiful woman. Only thus can one perceive the subtextual meaning of her book title.

²⁸ Lin Danya 林丹娅, "The Song of 'The Song of Everlasting Sorrow' [Changhen ge zhi ge]," 《长恨歌》之歌, *Xia Men Literature [Xiamen wenxue]* 厦门文学, no.9 (2008): 50.

²⁹ Wang, *Wang Anyi Talks*, 90.

Indeed it is tempting to draw a parallel between Wang Qiyao and Yang Guifei – since both are strikingly beautiful, ill-fated women – and simply read the book as the story of Wang Qiyao’s life. However, by doing so, one overlooks the deeper allegorical meanings that the author originally intended for her readers, as her comments to interviewers make plain.

To be sure, as the story of Shanghai slowly unfolds and eventually ends with the protagonist’s dreadful and abrupt death, the subtextual meaning of the book’s title, *The Song of the Everlasting Sorrow*, gains emotional strength and potency with the passing of each defining moment of her life. The melancholic mood that was established at the outset of Book I continues to build and becomes the dominant theme playing throughout each chapter of her life, a life which embodies the story of Shanghai. In retrospect, when Wang Qiyao’s maternal grandmother comes to her rescue and ferries her away from Shanghai to her hometown to be healed from the loss of Wang’s lover, her grandmother encounters the image of a sad but still young and attractive woman. However, her grandmother’s experienced eyes also see beyond the façade of Wang’s prettiness into Wang Qiyao’s future life forty years hence. She bemoans the fact that Wang Qiyao took a wrong turn at the tender start of her adulthood and has been finding it too difficult to turn it around.³⁰ Indeed, the sense of regret and bleakness heightens as Wang Qiyao uneasily moves on with her life. Ultimately, the tragic end of the story denies readers any hope of redemption that they might be harboring for Wang Qiyao. Despite her grandmother’s prescience about her future, Wang Qiyao is unable to comprehend or, indeed, foresee and grasp her own fate. Moreover, even at the moment of her deep loss, Wang Qiyao fails to establish an emotional connection with her grandmother, but is, instead, repeatedly distracted and appalled by her grandmother’s aging face.³¹ In the end, she fails to recognize the tragic nature of her life, let

³⁰ Wang, *Changhen ge*, 132.

³¹ Wang, *Changhen ge*, 134.

alone analyze the causes. Ironically, her murder brings her a rare but brief moment of epiphany: she at last realizes that, in watching the actress who acted in the murder scene at the movie studio she visited forty years back, she was really watching her own death. This moment of epiphany occurs on her deathbed, seconds before her death, a moment that arrives too late for any promise of a new life to be fulfilled.

The murder scene at the film studio forty years before is a pivotal moment. As she lingers around at the scene, her heart fills with admiration for the silver screen and the glamorous actress on the set. She is in complete awe of the climactic moment when the cameraman shouts “Action!” She intuitively senses the miraculous power of the moment to transform a plain life into a glorious one, and, at that moment, virtually everything else in her life pales in comparison. Although her fate is more or less playing out right before her eyes, she fails to see it. At the time, she is practically blinded to anything beyond the superficial quality of the glamorous life promised by a career on the silver screen. Likewise, at a moment when what she needs most is heartfelt consolation from her grandmother, she is unable to bring herself to accept it because she cannot get beyond her repulsion at the old woman’s physical decay. In fact, throughout her adult life, Wang Qiyao finds it difficult or impossible to form emotional bonds with others. Her only period of true friendship with high school chum Wu Peizhen terminates abruptly and marks the end of her short-lived age of innocence. In retrospect, she realizes the qualitative difference between her friendship with Wu Peizhen and the others that are all somewhat based on mutual self-interest, including her friendship with Jiang Lili.³² Yet, when the movie director discovers that the pretty faced Wang Qiyao lacks the imaginative and transformative faculty necessary to shine on the silver screen, the vain Wang Qiyao’s humiliation is too difficult to bear. She immediately severs her relationship with Wu Peizhen, who has arranged a tour of the film studio

³² Wang, *Changhen ge*, 122.

simply as a token of friendship. Wang has to cut Wu out of her life so that no one will be there to remind her of the devastating failure of her screen test. Again, it is exactly her vain nature that impels her to choose such a course of action. She also declines Wu Peizhen's kind offer to take her to Hong Kong upon the imminent collapse of Shanghai. Her reason is simple and actually sensible: what would that make her but Wu's server or Wu's husband's concubine? Either option is difficult for Wang Qiyao to accept. She considers herself much prettier than Wu Peizhen and therefore thinks she deserves to be better off.³³

In an essay written during one of her hospital stays, the author recorded an interesting conversation about Wang Qiyao that she had with her roommate. The roommate reportedly commented, "Wang Qiyao is like the woman who dressed up in a long skirt on a bitter wintry day and just got herself killed because her skirt got tangled in the wheel of a truck."³⁴ In other words, her death was partly her own fault: she would not have been killed if she had not insisted on wearing such a skirt at such an unseasonable time. Wang thought her roommate's comment quite insightful. Wang's fate is also of her own making, from her entering the door of a film studio, to her competing in the Miss Shanghai pageant, to her subsequent decision to become the mistress of a powerful man, to her later decision to become the lover of an effeminate upper-class male, and finally her outcome as an unwed mother. Wang Qiyao does little real thinking and has a wanton disregard for consequences, only following her materialistic desires. Though she might say that she is searching for love, it becomes clear to the reader that what Wang prizes most in life is not love, but wealth and resources beyond what her meager lower middle class background can ever promise her. Her choice of becoming a mistress, her falling for Mr. Yan, and her repeated snubbing of Mr. Cheng, who stands on the same rung of the social ladder as she

³³ Wang, *Changhen ge*, 122.

³⁴ Wang Anyi 王安忆, *Xunzhao Shanghai* [Looking for Shanghai] 寻找上海 (Shanghai: Xue lin chubanshe, 2001), 77.

does, all acutely reflect Wang's materialistic nature. Mr. Cheng would be a much sought-after match for many *longtang* girls, but to Wang Qiyao, he represents a life that she has long been determined to rise above. Ironically, Mr. Cheng's dogged devotion to love is completely antithetical to and irreconcilable with Wang Qiyao's equally strong commitment to materialism, which ultimately dooms Mr. Cheng's chances with her. Indeed, while Mr. Cheng struggles to fit into the changing society that eventually forces him to give up his own life, Wang Qiyao's materialism helps to preserve her life in turbulent political circumstances, and more or less helps her thrive in the new China.

All in all, beyond the brief moment of epiphany on her deathbed, Wang Qiyao seems to feel little regret. If she could choose her life all over again, it seems unlikely that she would make any fundamentally different choice. Would she give up the opportunity to become Director Li's mistress and instead marry into the middle class life that Mr. Cheng represented? This is improbable given our understanding of Wang Qiyao's character. After all, by all accounts, she is an unusually determined, resilient and decisive woman even at an early age, who is firm in conviction and rarely troubled by sentiment. She moves forward even in the face of life's cruel jokes, reassured by the presence of the gold bars that Director Li has left her. In great contrast to Wang Qiyao, her friend Jiang Lili is a romantic, who has grown disillusioned with the new China and is constantly consumed by a sense of regret which not even her children, her husband or her kind-hearted mother-in-law can relieve. In many respects, Wang Qiyao appears to be a detached and aloof individual who is unfettered by the usual human emotions many others feel. Thus, the everlasting sorrow of the title can hardly be hers. Other than the single epiphany that she experiences at her death, which forces her to look back at a moment of her life forty years before, she has taken her life in stride, with her head held high, and is seemingly

unwilling to revisit or examine her past or put any effort into changing her life. After all, as long as the mahogany box containing the gold bars is stashed where she can find it, she has what she considers to be the only solid thing in her life, the ultimate guarantor of a life of material security, and that alone seems to make her life livable if not enjoyable.

All things considered, as in the Bai Juyi's poem, the everlasting sorrow of the title can only be the author's. In the end, the story of Shanghai as symbolized by the life of our main protagonist, Wang Qiyao, indeed pushes the sorrowful tone of the story to maximum capacity. During Wang Qiyao's adolescent years, Shanghai was known as the Paris of the East because it was full of the glamour and glitter of a big city. Its residents, Wang Qiyao among them, were accustomed to comforts and luxuries that were often only available in this material heaven. In the late 1940s, unbeknownst to the residents, Shanghai was living out its last days of splendor and indulgence while its residents and Wang Qiyao engrossed themselves in the Miss Shanghai competition. The city's total disregard for its future and its fixation on fame and glamour becomes apparent in an episode in the book during which the progressive movie director tries to dissuade Wang Qiyao from joining the competition for the Miss Shanghai Beauty Pageant, but to no avail. He bluntly confronts her with the assertion that what she seeks from the pageant is grounded in vanity, a thing that like a cloud will momentarily provide a brilliant illusion only to dissolve into nothingness.³⁵ Sadly, neither Wang Qiyao nor her city can hear such a warning. In fact, Wang Qiyao is so offended by the director's advice that she does not even give him a chance to finish his sentence.

Ironically, Wang Qiyao's experiences only a single period of short-lived happiness during which she lives in seclusion as the mistress of Director Li in a luxurious apartment. And yet even this moment foretells the imminent downfall of old Shanghai because of the city's total

³⁵ Wang, *Changhen ge*, 58.

disinterest in anything beyond material security. Shanghai, much like Wang Qiyao, refuses to face the forthcoming upheaval. Instead, the city pretends that life will go on as usual. Its populace live in “seclusion,” ignoring the fact that the city’s fate will soon be determined by the outcome of the civil war between the Communists and the Nationalists. In fact, a peculiar quietness, a silence that “was a feature of Shanghai in 1948,”³⁶ enveloped the city during the last years of the 1940s. It was as if by staying aloof from the rest of the world, Shanghai would miraculously be spared from the events that were happening elsewhere, and would magically retain its status quo. In a neat parallelism, the death of Director Li shatters Wang Qiyao’s world just as the death of Nationalism at the hands of the Communists shatters Shanghai’s world. Shanghai struggles with a new era under the rule of the Chinese Communist Party, just as Wang Qiyao struggles with the phase of her life after Director Li. She no longer can afford to live in the secluded apartment. Instead, she is forced to live in a tiny room located in a typical Shanghai *longtang*. Mirroring Wang Qiyao’s own fate, Shanghai from 1950s to the end of 1970s was also more subdued and lackluster. The once glorious material heaven grappled with serious material shortages, with food especially hard to come by. The situation was further worsened with the onset of the Cultural Revolution.

Remarkably, Shanghai emerged from the food shortage and the political turmoil without collapsing into total chaos, largely due to its material sensibility and its residents’ knack for self-preservation. One of most telling scenes from the book takes place around 1957 when the political atmosphere is stormy and food is sparse. A small group of unlikely Shanghainese come together for comfort food and company, including Wang Qiyao, Mrs. Yan, an ex-capitalist’s wife, Mr. Yan’s cousin, the only male heir of an old established Shanghai family, and the mixed-blood orphan Shasha whose deceased father was once a big wig in the Communist party and

³⁶ Wang, *Changhen ge*, 123.

whose mother is Russian. Wang Qiyao's tiny room becomes their refuge and they spend numerous empty afternoons and cold evenings together, methodically planning and miraculously preparing each scrumptuous meal out of their scanty food supply. On the surface, they appear to be a warm and loving family of friends. Deep down, however, they are divided, each keeping his or her guard carefully up, mindful of the other's intrusion. In the midst of joyful laughter, for example, Shasha secretly tells himself how much he despises these decaying bourgeois, the dregs of society, living a shortsighted day-to-day life³⁷. In truth, it is a group of selfish but lonely individuals who, on the one hand, are deeply conscious of class differences, while, on the other, still cling to the illusion of the good old Shanghai days when self-indulgence was the norm, an illusion that their shared meals allow them to maintain. The author's meticulous description of these dining scenes not only drive the story forward but also clearly reveal the narrow, superficial and materialistic nature of the life that Wang Qiyao leads. By capturing such fine everyday details and nuances of Shanghai life, the author succeeds in exposing the city's underlying materialistic core.

As the story moves into the decade of the 1980s, both Wang Qiyao and Shanghai have undergone a transformation. The former's materialistic streak seems to mesh perfectly with Shanghai's latest incarnation. The streets are filled with bustling and callow youth who are all too eager to chase the trends of fashion. Among them, Wang Qiyao stands almost timeless with her carefully made up face and her neatly and elegantly clad body that is still shapely and slender despite her age, which Wang Qiyao stops at nothing to conceal. In fact, it is not until the moment of her death that her murderer Long Legs fully realizes that Wang Qiyao is as old as she is, which comes as a total surprise to him. The forceful removal of Wang Qiyao's mask parallels the author's removal of the mask that has covered the face of her home city Shanghai. Thus

³⁷ Wang, *Changhen ge*, 180.

Wang Anyi reveals her opinion of the new Shanghai, an opinion that expresses distaste for what Shanghai has become in the face of new China's economic success. To the author, the rise of Shanghai seems like *déjà vu*: forty years before, Shanghai was the de facto material capital of China, decadent and materialistic. And now, four decades hence, *Huaihai* Road, one of the city's main thoroughfares, is once again filled with merchandise and eager consumers.

Thus, not unlike the everlasting sorrow expressed by the epic poem and felt by Bai Juyi rather than the players on his poetic stage, the everlasting sorrow of the book title is a lament felt by the author Wang Anyi. Regardless of the tragic nature of Wang Qiyao's passing, and the series of unfortunate events that she has brought upon herself and struggled with throughout her life, our protagonist ultimately remains true to herself as the ambitious and materialistic girl who jumps at the chance of becoming mistress to a powerful man. Just like the regret and sorrow Bai Juyi so elegantly expressed more than a millennium ago while watching his once glorious kingdom decline, Wang Anyi's sorrow is equally arresting as she bears witness to the decline of her beloved home city as it slips deeper and deeper into the miasma of crude materialism, a decline she is powerless to prevent. Bai Juyi bemoans the fact that Emperor Xuanzong was too intoxicated by Lady Yang's sexual appeal to face up to his duty as emperor. Likewise, as symbolized by its emblematic daughter Wang Qiyao, Shanghai is too ingrained in the pursuit of becoming the new capital of the world to do any of the soul-searching that is sorely needed at a time of rapid development.

As the author unfolds Wang Qiyao's life journey, the sorrow she feels toward her home city is never far from her consciousness. From her bird's eye view of Shanghai's *longtang* to the bustling *Huaihai* Road of forty years later, a full and complete image of Shanghai is realized at the story's close, an image that, like the decaying *longtang*, remains elegiac and dark. Like the

message Bai Juyi intended to convey through his epic poem, Wang Anyi also intends this subtextual meaning of sorrow to serve as a warning to the present Shanghai about its future. To be sure, the author is more aware of the tragedy than others might be. To her, the sorrow is tangible as the city transforms itself into a soulless arena for material wealth, with little space left for the spiritual.

Regrettably, the message seems to have been largely ignored or misunderstood by readers as well as the media that gave little notice to the book in the first five or six years after its publication. Only after the year 2000 did media companies jump on the bandwagon hoping to cash in on Shanghai's new "hot" status by turning the book into a movie, play and TV series. Because of this, the demand for the book also increased dramatically. The author, true to form, was critical of this sudden popularity and disturbed because the dramatizations altered the nature of the book, highlighting and exaggerating only the most worldly and popular elements without also including the more serious and tragic aspects.³⁸ The author's frustration is understandable. Through the visual media, Wang Qiyao the character has been transformed into one of the most glamorous and recognized icons of Shanghai, while the central message of the book has been whitewashed into a nostalgic look at the past. Wang Qiyao's greatest regret may have been her failure to become a silver screen idol, yet, ironically, her dream is realized after all through the subsequent popularity of the book.

³⁸ Wang Anyi and Wang Xiaoming 王安忆和王晓明, "Yu zuojia Wang Anyi mianduimian [Face to Face with Writer Wang Anyi]," 与作家王安忆面对面, *Journal of Bohai University (Philosophy & Social Science Edition)* 渤海大学学报哲学社会科学版, no.6 (2007), 38-48.

Chapter Three:

Writing Shanghai: One City, Two Different Approaches – A Comparative Analysis between Zhang Ailing and Wang Anyi

The Emergence and Popularization of Shanghai as a Literary Subject

Despite some critics' eagerness to draw parallels between Zhang Ailing and Wang Anyi, Wang Anyi has continued to deny the assertion that she is an heir to Zhang Ailing's Shanghai style writing. Besides the fact that they both happen to be female and Shanghai native writers, Wang insists there is no association between Zhang's writings and her own. In this chapter, I compare a work of fiction by Zhang Ailing to a work of fiction by Wang Anyi in which they both portray Shanghai and its men and women. I will use these works to analyze similarities and differences in their styles. In particular, my focus is on their shared penchant for depicting subtle yet distinctive details of the everyday lives of ordinary Shanghai citizens and how these details contribute differently to their individual works. My first goal is to discover the similarities. But more importantly, I aim to find out where and how they differ in their approach to depicting Shanghai and its complex inhabitants. My study of Zhang Ailing will focus on an early and formidable work, her now famous novella entitled *Sealed Off* (*Fengsuo* 封锁, 1943). Remarkably, Zhang was still in her early 20s when she wrote it, but as a precocious and discriminating writer, this was no accidental achievement. She benefited from a solid education in both classical Chinese and Western literatures. The novel showcases the dazzling talents that made Zhang one of most renowned writers on the modern Chinese literary scene. In particular, the work captures Shanghai in an atypical moment and offers an up-close and yet expansive view of the staleness of Shanghai bourgeois life. In regard to Wang Anyi's writing, the focus will remain with her seminal work *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*.

Before we delve into the discussion of Zhang Ailing and Wang Anyi's fiction writing, it is necessary to survey the emergence and popularization of Shanghai as a literary subject. After all, Zhang and Wang have arguably become the two most celebrated novelists who write about Shanghai. In addition, it is largely based on their writings of the same subject, Shanghai, that the comparison between the two writers has become possible. Despite its relatively short history, Shanghai as a city continues to occupy an important place in people's minds and imaginations. Unlike other Chinese cities that have long and illustrious histories, Shanghai was merely an isolated fishermen's village four hundred years ago. Following the Opium War (1839 – 1842), the Treaty of Nanjing was ratified, which assigned Shanghai as one of five treaty ports. This resulted in a significant increase in the number of foreigners and immigrants from other parts of China. These newcomers came searching for fresh opportunities that were lacking in other regions of the country and world. The city of Shanghai along with its International Settlement expanded dramatically and steadily while its domestic and foreign populations swelled. By the end of the 1940s, Shanghai had established itself as the undisputed center of trade, finance, consumption and entertainment in China and boasted a population of over five million people.³⁹ How quickly this once- isolated fishing post transformed itself into a glamorous material heaven whose appetite for consumption knew no rival among cities in the Far East. In comparison to other large cities in the region, Shanghai, with its elegant tree lined French Quarter, decadent night clubs and lively jazz scenes, flamboyant neon lights, attractive French cafés, and impressive European architecture surrounding the Bund, embodied the qualities of a rising Asian metropolis with just the perfect touch of Old World European charm. The coexistence of a largely immigrant domestic population and a steady flow of foreign residents set Shanghai apart

³⁹Zhang Xudong, *Postsocialism and Cultural Politics: China in the Last Decade of the Twentieth Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 182.

from other traditional Chinese cities. As David Der-wei Wang points out, “Shanghai thrived on account of the competition and interaction between and among foreign and indigenous forces, practices and institutions.”⁴⁰ For many Chinese, glittering Shanghai was a beacon of hope and opportunity. It was the gateway to a modernity that evaded other parts of China. And it largely remains so today.

Given this cosmopolitan, diverse, vibrant yet transient background, it is not surprising that Shanghai entered the consciousness of many writers, and that writing about Shanghai became a serious focus for quite a number of them. As early as 1894, Shanghai is highlighted as a geographical locale where an expansive narrative can take hold, as seen in the novel *Sing-song Girls of Shanghai* (*Haishanghai liezhuan* 海上花列传), written by Han Bangqing (韩邦庆, 1856-1894). Interestingly, like many other Shanghai residents, the author Han was an immigrant from Beijing drawn to this port city, in part, by its thriving literary scene. *Sing-song Girls of Shanghai* offers a panoramic portrait of Shanghai life centering on more than a dozen courtesans and their clients during the last decades of the nineteenth century. The book differentiates itself from the conventional courtesan novels that were popular in those days by avoiding the sensationalism and drama surrounding the torrid details and shady transactions that went on between the courtesans and their clients. Instead, the novel’s portrait of Shanghai life, and its men and women, is skillfully laid out in a matter-of-fact style that resorts to neither dramatic language nor thundering plot. The quality of realism in Han Bangqing’s novel has been praised and admired by other noted novelists including Eileen Chang.⁴¹ The sprawling sixty-four chapters of the day-to-day lives of a large group of characters offer an intimate insider’s view of Shanghai and its colorful residents. The unique urban aura and glamorous allure of Shanghai are

⁴⁰ Han Bangqing, *The Sing-Song Girls of Shanghai*, firsts translated by Eileen Chang and revised and edited by Eva Hung (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), x.

⁴¹ Han, *The Sing-Song Girls of Shanghai*, xi.

evident in the chronicle of the character Second Treasure and her family, for example, who arrive there from the impoverished countryside. Their Shanghai experience proves to be mostly sorrowful and less gratifying than expected.

Over the years, Shanghai, is evoked repeatedly by writers of different genres in a continuous effort to penetrate, capture and reveal the unique psyche that is embodied by this urban giant. In fact, following the appearance of *Sing-song Girls*, a formidable literary style developed and became known as the Shanghai Style (*Haipai* 海派). David Der-wei Wang traces the origin and the trademarks of this literary style:

Mixing both the cosmopolitan and local color unique to Shanghai, *Sing-song Girls* renders an urban regionalism that anticipates the literary style and attitude later called the Shanghai style, or *haipai*. The *Haipai School* comprises writers who assume postures ranging from the newly imported flaneur to the old-style literatus and features a hybrid of trends as far apart as Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies fiction and neoimpressionist sketches. Arising from and nourished by a commercial culture, the Shanghai style is flamboyant and changeable, with dilettantism and frivolity as its twin trademarks. But beneath their flamboyant style lies the writers' inflamed desire to catch up with time; tear down the ostentatious and frivolous façade of the text, and one finds a desolate city threatened with the menacing power of modernization.⁴²

As Wang points out, the two trademarks of the Shanghai style (*haipai*) are dilettantism and frivolity. This literary style is closely associated with the unique urban consumerism that is largely nourished by – and caters to – the urbanites of Shanghai who enjoy the benefits of living in a modern city. Therefore, the Shanghai style of literature is viewed more or less as a form of commodity that intends to offer lighthearted entertainment and amusement. In reality, the style is often unfavorably compared with its counterpart, the Beijing style (*jingpai* 京派), which is seen as more highbrow because of its intense concern with historical issues and its mission of raising social consciousness and thereby creating a more progressive society.

⁴² Han, *The Sing-Song Girls of Shanghai*, xvii.

Nonetheless, the Shanghai style flourished, and the popularization of Shanghai as a literary subject inevitably took off. It began in the early years of the Republican era when the formation of the Republic of China in 1912 brought the end of the nearly three-century long imperial rule of the Qing dynasty (1644-1912). Representative writers of this style are Bao Tianxiao (包天笑) and Zhou Soujuan (周瘦鹃), who carried on the classical literary tradition of *Dream of the Red Chamber* (*Honglong meng* 红楼梦) and combined the old tradition with an infusion of end-of-the-century sentimentalities and sensibility imported from Europe and manifested in such literary works as *The Lady of the Camellias*. This literary style became popularized as the Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies fiction genre because of its romantic inclination. Starting in the 1930s, a significantly varied literary trend known as the neoimpressionist school (*xin ganjue pai* 新感觉派) took center stage represented by writers such as Mu Shiyong (穆时英), Liu Na'ou (刘呐鸥), Zhang Ziping (张资平), and Shi Zecun (施蛰存). These writers focused on Shanghai in the attempt to pinpoint the psychological pulse of a city that rarely slept. Their style, much different from the preceding group, however, is a great deal influenced by exotic sources such as Japanese and French neoimpressionism movements as well as Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytical theory. Mu Shiyong's novelette entitled *Shanghai Foxtrot* (*Shanghai hubuwu* 上海狐步舞), is representative of the genre. It consists of eight sharply observed vignettes of Shanghai life, occurring in a single night, that are sometimes despairing and at times decadent. Meanwhile, Chinese realist writers, most notably Mao Dun (茅盾), also tried their hands at depicting Shanghai life and its fluid yet elusive culture. His many works such as *Midnight* (*Ziye* 子夜, 1932) reveal his insight into the multifaceted Shanghai life of the 1930s and are much celebrated in new China. Other famed left-wing Chinese writers such as Lu Xun (鲁迅) and Ba Jin (巴金) also made Shanghai their home and produced a number of works based

on their observations of a Shanghai comprised of people from all walks of life. Then in the 1940s, a new and exciting group of writers energized the Shanghai literary scene. Among them were a talented young Shanghai native named Zhang Ailing (张爱玲) and her female friend Su Qing (苏青). Their work became known as the new Shanghai style (*xin haipai* 新海派). In the last twenty years there has been a resurgence of interest in, and nostalgia for, old Shanghai. This, combined with Zhang's enigmatic persona, her reclusive lifestyle, and the popularity of her works, had made her the face of the new Shanghai style literature. Her works are not only known to Chinese speakers across the greater areas of Chinese-speaking regions, but also, to some degree, to Westerners partly due to the fact that she chose to live the greater part of her adult life in America, departing from Shanghai to Hong Kong in 1951, then from Hong Kong to America in 1955. Her incisive depiction of Shanghai life and its inhabitants during her early writing career reveals her uncanny understanding of the city and its people, and her works during the period are generally considered the apex of her literary output.

Shanghai as a literary subject appears to be inexhaustible, with yet a new generation of writers, including Wang Anyi, continuing to write about the city and its people. In 1995, with the publication of *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, which happened to coincide with the year in which Zhang Ailing quietly passed away in an apartment building in California, Wang Anyi, and her writings have received quite a lot of attention especially from critics who were excited to find traces of Zhang Ailing in Wang's writings.⁴³ Moreover, Wang Qiyao, the protagonist in *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, is a former Miss Shanghai. This aspect of her character suddenly energized a new level of fascination with Shanghai and its alluring past as China's first modern city. As expected, many regard the writings of Zhang Ailing and Wang Anyi, perhaps the two

⁴³ Xiao, "Can She Say No to Zhang Ailing", 514.

most notable modern female Shanghainese writers of all, as some of finest and most in-depth narratives of this vast city and its inhabitants.

A Summary of Zhang Ailing's Writings on Shanghai and Her Novella *Sealed Off*

While Wang Anyi is a prolific professional writer who doggedly keeps up an enviable output of quality works year after year, of which many are weighty novels, Zhang Ailing's literary opus is considerably slimmer in comparison. *The Rice-Sprout Song* (*Yangge* 秧歌, 1954) and *Naked Earth* (*Chidi zhi lian* 赤地之恋, 1956) are two of the few novels she wrote and published after she had already left Shanghai for good. However, some of her novels, noted for their controversial anti-Communist stance, did not receive critical acclaim and ultimately failed to launch her literary career in America. Her short stories and novellas were mainly written during the short period between 1943 and 1947 in Shanghai, though some were also written in Hong Kong. These works are considered the cornerstone of her legacy and they epitomize the pinnacle of her literary achievement. In 1943, with the publication of her novella, *Aloeswood Incense: the First Brazier* (*Chenxiangxie di yi lu xiang* 沉香屑第一炉香), Zhang Ailing's fame spread and she became Shanghai's most celebrated writer practically overnight. Her subsequent acquaintance with other notable Shanghai writers, including the influential editor Zhou Soujuan, a successful author of the Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies Fiction genre, helped to further solidify her position on the Shanghai literary stage. Her writings were eagerly anticipated and read by many from the very start of her meteoric rise. Through her short stories, readers are treated to remarkable passages filled with perceptive sketches and vignettes of day-to-day life in Shanghai. Her works help peel back the shimmering outer layer of the glamorous Shanghai urban life seen by many, and expose the often mundane and sometimes unsavory underlayers

inhabited by Shanghai's bourgeois and lower class members. Her principal characters, especially females, are emotionally complex, imperfect human beings who are rarely likeable. They often suffer from loveless marriages and tragic fates that they visit upon others or others visit upon them. Overall, it is noted that Zhang Ailing's works have an ambiance that is frequently and decisively dark and pessimistic.

Despite the differences between the two authors, Zhang Ailing's *Sealed off*, published in 1943, has many similarities with *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*. Each writer reveals a profound interest in exploring complex human nature and an extraordinary insight into human nature in general. *Sealed Off* is set against the backdrop of the tumultuous Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945) in Shanghai. Although the war is hardly mentioned, one is instantly aware of it with the mention of the sealing off of the city following an air raid. The novella contains no more than 8000 words, and focuses on a single moment in time: the beginning and the end of an untimely air raid during afternoon rush hour when a loaded tram is suddenly forced to come to a complete halt. The story takes place inside the tram, a quintessential and iconic urban transportation fixture that is a symbol of Shanghai's modernity. The story captures Shanghainese from all walks of life trapped in the tramcar during a period of unexpected forced immobility and awkward emptiness, an occasion that is entirely out of character with the perpetual bustle of the city. The two central characters are an unlikely pair who, on an ordinary day, would probably never cross paths. The man is a typical married thirty-five year old bank accountant who leads a respectable and predictable middle-class existence that is ticking away steadily. The woman is something of an over-achiever, a single twenty-five year old assistant lecturer at a college. When it comes to her looks, Zhang Ailing writes, "She wasn't bad-looking, but hers was an uncertain, unfocused beauty, an afraid-she-had-offended-someone kind of beauty.

Her face was bland, slack, lacking definition.”⁴⁴ However, her demure appearance merely serves as a façade for her boiling discontent with her prescribed and lackluster life.

Zhang Ailing opens the story with a simile referring to the two parallel tram tracks stretching endlessly onward like two slippery snake-like eels fresh from the water. This unflattering and slightly sinister image comes directly from the viewpoint of the tram driver, who, the narrator is amused to find, has not been driven to “madness” (*fafeng* 发疯) as a result of this monotonous vista. The next paragraph, which contains only two short sentences, reveals the narrator’s thinly disguised sense of irony: “If the city had not been sealed off because of the air raid, the tram car would have gone on forever. It is sealed off now.” Shanghai is a city not at all unlike the tram car; it is, as a rule, perpetually in motion. Then, suddenly, the city is forced into an uncharacteristic idleness due to an air raid which throws its inhabitants, utterly unprepared, into a sudden disconnection between time and space. Zhang Ailing uses this hiatus to cast a critical eye over the place and people that she knows so intimately. She misses nothing, managing to paint a lively picture of Shanghai urban life that is photographically detailed and rich in sensory input. She captures the sounds, sights, colors, smells, textures, and vibrations of the moment of immobility. The tram driver, the beggars, the sibling-like couple, the bank accountant Lü Zongzhen (吕宗桢), the assistant college lecturer Cuiyuan (翠远), the bald-headed old man, the nanny and child, the medical school student, the obsequious young nephew: No one falls outside Zhang’s gaze; they all become a part of her caricature of Shanghai life:

⁴⁴ Eileen Chang, “Sealed Off,” trans. Karen Kingsbury, in *The Columbia Companion to Modern East Asian Literature*, eds. Joshua S. Mostow and Kirk A. Denton (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 190.

Then there was a braver beggar, a man from Shandong, who firmly broke the silence. His voice was round and resonant: “Sad, sad, sad! No money do I have!” An old, old song, sung from one century to the next. The tram driver, who also was from Shandong, succumbed to the sonorous tune. Heaving a long sigh, he folded his arms across his chest, leaned against the tram door, and joined in: “Sad, sad, sad! No money do I have!”

...

A middle-aged couple who looked very much like brother and sister stood together in the middle of the tram, holding onto the leather straps, “Careful!” the woman suddenly yelled. “Don’t get your trousers dirty!” The man flinched, then slowly raised the hand from which a packet of smoked fish dangled. Very cautiously, very gingerly, he held the paper packet, which was brimming with oil, several inches away from his suit pants. His wife did not let up. “Do you know what dry-cleaning costs these days? Or what it costs to get a pair of trousers made?”⁴⁵

Sometimes, the narrator tells the story through the eyes of the main male character Lü Zongzhen, allowing readers to gain his perspective on his wife, the main female character Cuiyuan, his cousin and other passengers. At other times it is Cuiyuan whose perspective the readers inhabit, allowing them to observe her parents, her colleagues, her students, and Lü Zongzhen, as she does. Occasionally, the narrator appears to be an indifferent passenger sitting in a corner and watching and commenting from afar.

As in her other works, Zhang Ailing writes in very clear prose. Her sentences are often short and pithy while her language is both idiomatic and idiosyncratic, revealing a unique educational background that combines both solid training in classic and vernacular Chinese literature and a deep familiarity with Western literature. She credits *Dream of the Red Chamber*, one of China’s four classical fictions, as having the most profound influence on her writings.⁴⁶ That said, Zhang Ailing is one of the rare writers who feels equally at home writing in English and Chinese. Her exposure to such a wide range of literary works must have inspired her to weigh each word carefully in order to achieve the desired effect. Zhang Ailing’s economic use

⁴⁵ Eileen Chang, “Sealed Off,” 189.

⁴⁶ Zhang Ailing 张爱玲, *Honglou meng yan [Nightmare in the Red Chamber] 红楼梦魇* (Beijing: Beijing shiyue wenyi chubanshe, 2007), 5.

of words can be illustrated in this one terse comment about Cuiyuan's family, "There are more upright citizens than real people in this world." These words reveal clearly Cuiyuan's weariness of her western style, classical-music-listening family. In *Sealed Off*, as in her other works, Zhang's prose is also rich with simile, metaphor, repetition, allusion and vivid imagery. Her sketch of the main character, Cuiyuan, proves to be especially memorable. Ironically, in the story, her beauty is described as so "undefined" that even her mother cannot describe for sure whether she has a long face or round face. In our male protagonist's eyes, she appears to be as plain as "squeezed-out toothpaste," without any style worth mentioning. Just a few hours later, he sits down at home and her facial features have already become too blurred for him to recall.

To return to the main theme of the story, the narrator tells us that the giant metropolis has been sealed off and has fallen into dormancy following the air raid. Thus the story begins in a surreal atmosphere in which the comfort of daily routine has been challenged. Plenty of pandemonium follows in the tramcar after the sealing off and before the new equilibrium is reached. However, paradoxically, this shared experience also offers a temporary and unexpected escape from the everyday grind of modern living. To Zhang Ailing, the occasion presents itself as an ideal opportunity to examine human nature up close with a subtle touch of irony and humor. In the story, the readers watch the trapped tram car passengers awkwardly adjust to the new reality and regain their sense of serenity. To fill up the emptiness of time, Lü Zongzhen scrutinizes a packet of newspaper-wrapped steamed spinach buns and devours every printed character on the half piece of newspaper that has been wrapped around them. Inspired by this clever move, his desperate fellow passengers follow suit, hungrily reading anything and everything from name cards and receipts to street signs. Meanwhile, Cuiyuan tries to focus her attention on grading her students' papers. In an unexpected turn of events, Lü Zongzhen reseats

himself next to Cuiyuan in order to avoid the unpleasant face-to-face meeting with his opportunistic and toadying nephew, also on the tram, who is looking for a convenient marriage with Lü's daughter. Uncharacteristically and on the spur of the moment, he attempts to flirt with Cuiyuan in an effort to further thwart his nephew's attempt to converse with him. Equally uncharacteristically, she responds to his flirtation, at first only half-heartedly but soon finding herself deep in conversation with him, a conversation that ultimately takes the form of a heartfelt confession between two amorous lovebirds. He pours his heart out, sharing with her the most intimate parts of his life including stories about his wife, his work, his colleagues, his untold sadness and his once youthful ambition. He even hints about a divorce and a new marriage with her. However, the eagerly anticipated climactic moment evaporates before it ever materializes when the air raid ends and tram car starts up again. Lü Zongzhen quickly slides back to his old seat, and she finds herself seated alone once again. Superficially, life as they know it falls back into prosaic normalcy and familiar repetitive rhythms. She knows instinctively and painfully that her phone will not ring with the call he promised to make to her and that to her he is as good as dead. At that point, just in case any readers are still harboring some hope for their romance, the narrator interrupts and quietly reminds us that, yes, Cuiyuan realizes that whatever happened then was not really reality but part of an imprudent dream shared by Shanghai during a period of dormancy brought on by the war. To drive the point home, Zhang Ailing closes the story with another unsavory image: that of a bug crawling aimlessly in Lü Zongzhen's bedroom while he is carrying out his bedtime routine. This is reminiscent of the opening imagery of the two sinister-looking snake-like eels and so the tale comes full circle and closes with an equally unsettling image.

Everyday Details in Wang Anyi and Zhang Ailing's Fiction

The most noticeable characteristic in both Zhang Ailing's *Sealed Off* and Wang Anyi's *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow* is the authors' penchant for reporting everyday details. It is as if the two writers are endowed with an invisible third eye that allows them to notice elements that often elude other writers. Moreover, they use these details to enhance character development, intensify the emotions of characters in order to advance the plot, and add texture to the scenario. Together these details help to conjure up authentic images of Shanghai's middle class. In the novella *Sealed Off*, such everyday details are abundant. In one case, Lü Zongzhen examines the steamed spinach buns wrapped with newspaper while trapped in the tram car. When he carefully pulls back the paper, the paper has left the imprint of the ink characters on the buns, with every character in reverse. Patiently, he lowers his head and figures it out word by word. The act of reading bits and pieces of newspaper fragments imprinted in reverse on steamed buns has an undeniable comic undertone. This detail also inspires pathos: Reading about the spectacle in such solemn detail, readers are left with an indelible impression of the absurdity of the moment, and a growing pity (along, perhaps, with a bit of admiration for his resourcefulness) for the person who finds himself in a position where an act like this would be performed. By the same token, *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow* showcases countless examples of finely depicted everyday details. In the chapter describing the iconic Shanghai *longtang*, Wang Anyi's writing breathes life into this otherwise static and mundane urban space of Shanghai:

To return to the highest point in the city and look down on it from another angle: clothes hanging out to dry on the cluttered bamboo poles hint at the private lives and loves that lie hidden underneath. In the garden, potted balsams, ghost flowers, scallions, and garlic also breathe the faint air of a secret affair. The empty pigeon cage upon the roof is an empty heart. Broken roof tiles lying in disarray are symbols of the body and soul. ... Footsteps sound different in these two types of *longtang*. In the former the sound is crisp and bright, but in the latter it is something that you absorb and keep inside. The former is

a collection of polite pleasantries, the latter of words spoken from the bottom of one's heart. Neither is like an official document; both belong to the necessary language of the everyday.⁴⁷

Evidently, through the detailed chronicle of trivial yet quintessential objects of Shanghai such as the steamed spinach buns, the empty pigeon cage and the sounds of footsteps from the *longtang*, both writers reveal their profound interest in, and genuine affection for, the everyday life led by their fellow Shanghainese. It is obvious that they are fully aware of the fact that even the smallest detail can have a great emotional impact on their readers.

Perhaps it is because they are head and shoulders above many of their peers in their shared ability to capture and depict even the most minute and unadorned images, sounds and daily rituals of everyday Shanghai that they are so celebrated. In the past, critics and readers often singled out these two writers' mutual fondness for everyday detail and their talent in recreating a literary version of Shanghai. Some critics have also declared Wang Anyi to be the long-awaited successor to Zhang Ailing's Shanghai style literature. However, Wang Anyi consistently rejects the notion, claiming that there is no such association between her and Zhang Ailing.⁴⁸ While it is true that both writers are exceptionally skillful in describing daily minutiae, the question remains: Are their treatments of such details sufficiently similar that one can claim Wang to be the successor of Zhang's literary style? On closer examination, it appears that this is hardly the case. Both the way these two writers view these details and the way they incorporate these details into their final works are driven by their deeply held individual philosophies regarding what they consider the best way of writing, and their belief in what these details should ultimately achieve for their fictional works. A deeper analysis of their work reveals that the

⁴⁷ Wang, *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, 6.

⁴⁸ Wang, *Wang Anyi Talks*, 206.

differences between Wang Anyi and Zhang Ailing run deep regarding their treatment of such everyday details.

In reading Wang Anyi's essay, "History in My Eyes is Comprised of Everyday Life" (*Wo yan zhong de lishi shi richang de* 我眼中的历史是日常的), one is afforded the rare chance to peek into the author's mind and glimpse her motivation for the extensive use of everyday details. In the essay, she specifically talks about *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow* and how she relies on everyday details of life to develop her own unique perspective on a common history. As she declares in the title of the essay, she strongly believes that history is the evolution and accumulation of bits and pieces of daily life. In her opinion, the face of history should not only be represented by a series of monumental and iconic moments but also by the subtle changes occurring to ordinary people going about their ordinary lives. In fact, she believes the latter to be real history. For instance, she considers the change in women's attire from the traditional *qipao* (旗袍) to the Lenin suit that seemed to occur overnight on the Shanghai streets to be history first hand.⁴⁹ Such philosophy is clearly on display in her seminal work, *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, which also covers the period of the Cultural Revolution. Unlike other writers, the author does not portray the period with the iconic and familiar images that have long been associated with the revolution such as Red Guards and big-character posters (*dazi bao* 大字报). Instead, what Wang Anyi focuses on are the subtle yet significant changes to the daily routines and activities of everyday life as they occur from minute to minute and day to day to capture the impact of the ongoing revolution. When describing the year that the Cultural Revolution began, she observes, "It was during the summer of 1966 that the red and black-tiled rooftops riddled with protruding dormer windows and concrete terraces were all pried open suddenly, their

⁴⁹ Wang, *Wang Anyi Talks*, 155.

secrets laid bare for everyone to see.”⁵⁰ Here, the author directs the reader’s gaze to the widespread destruction of and intrusion into ordinary homes of the Shanghai *longtang* due to the revolution without implicitly mentioning the phrase “the Red Guards.” She merely implies that the quiet family lives are now suddenly exposed with the forced open windows and terraces after the visits made by the Red Guards. Thus, the author focuses on the homes and moves away from main streets where major events usually occur. In so doing, it is apparent that her account of this history sets itself miles apart from the standard narrative of the historical event that commonly uses images of angry Red Guards and the omnipotent Chairman Mao to portray the Cultural Revolution. By bringing details as minute, as prosaic and yet as authentic as the pried open “dormer windows” on the rooftops of the Shanghai *longtang* homes to her readers’ attention, Wang Anyi is able to zoom in on the horrific event from a vantage point that is intensely personal, thus allowing her readers to experience the history the way her characters, the ordinary Shanghainese, experienced it. Her descriptive focal point appears to reflect the author’s desire to connect with her characters at a grassroots level. Likewise, viewed in its entirety, *the Song of Everlasting Sorrow* depicts Shanghai’s historical vicissitudes by zeroing in on the life of an emblematic daughter of Shanghai, with descriptions of every nook and cranny of her life. In a way, by making her life so full and rich in detail, the author literally allows the history of Shanghai to play out in the living room of Wang Qiyao’s little apartment. Translating the author’s own words, the history of Shanghai can be summed up as follows: “When Wang Qiyao steps down from the stage of the Miss Shanghai Beauty Pageant competition, she walks into a room in an unadorned Shanghai *longtang*. Over the course of time, the type of guest who visits her house slowly changes from capitalists such as Mrs. Yan to the likes of the shady black

⁵⁰ Wang, *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, 281.

market currency exchanger Long Legs. This is the history as I know it.”⁵¹ In weaving such details into her narrative, the author shows that she clearly values the memories of these intimacies of day to day life and their vital importance in preserving and presenting a history that will resonate deeply with both readers unfamiliar with it as well as people who have lived through it.

In addition, the two writers use details that are reflective of their own unique literary backgrounds. In Wang Anyi’s case, her devotion to everyday detail seems to be also conditioned by her experience growing up under the literary tradition of the May Fourth Movement (*wu si yundong* 五四运动)⁵² that started in 1919. In retrospect, her view on history seems to echo the May Fourth critics’ belief that literature should in itself create the truthful version of life by capturing history in its whole. By weaving a generous amount of carefully observed everyday details into her writing, Wang Anyi seems to come close to “capturing history in its whole.” In her study of Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies fiction⁵³, Rey Chow points out that the May Fourth proponents’ advocacy of the independent status of literature was assimilated from the readings of Western literature and infused with a Western sense of humanism that leads to the ideal of literature as a new agent for social change.⁵⁴ Here, humanism and social change do not necessarily mean to call for a deliberate rebellion against society but rather to imbue a sense of

⁵¹ Wang, *Wang Anyi Talks*, 121.

⁵² The May Fourth Movement refers to the intellectual revolution and sociopolitical reform movement that occurred in China in 1917–21. The movement was directed toward national independence, emancipation of the individual, and rebuilding society and culture. In 1915, in the face of Japanese encroachment on China, young intellectuals, inspired by *New Youth* (*Xin qingnian* 新青年), a monthly magazine edited by the iconoclastic intellectual revolutionary Chen Duxiu (陈独秀), began agitating for the reform and strengthening of Chinese society. As part of this movement, they attacked traditional Confucian ideas and exalted Western ideas, particularly science and democracy.

⁵³ Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies fiction is a label for a type of fiction writing. According to Perry Link, it was first used in the late 1910s to refer to the classical-style love stories of a small, but very widely read, group of authors who made liberal use of the traditional symbols of mandarin ducks and butterflies for pairs of lovers.

⁵⁴ Rey Chow, *Woman and Chinese Modernity: the Politics of Reading between West and East* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 42.

social consciousness throughout one's writing. Apparently, such ideals also took root in generations of writers to come, Wang Anyi among them. In discussing early influences on her writing, Wang talks about how her generation grew up reading and being nourished by Soviet era literature, and how the humanistic tradition was instilled in her and became part of who she is as a writer, implying the importance of being socially conscious. She also maintains that she shares the humanist's general concern about the people.⁵⁵ Wang Anyi, growing up in new China and, being an admirer of the prominent May Fourth Movement leaders and the Left-Wing writers such as Lu Xun (鲁迅) and Ba Jin (巴金), is well positioned to carry on such a tradition. In fact, much of Wang Anyi's fiction writing, including *the Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, seems to reflect the confluence of these views. From the start to the end of the novel, the author's voice as a socially conscious writer comes through repeatedly. Her focus remains on the ordinary Shanghai residents and the future that Shanghai is heading into. Wang Anyi's earlier commentary further confirms her status as a proud guardian of such a humanistic tradition; she is somebody who is constantly preoccupied with historical issues and who shares a strong sense of social consciousness. Her focus on and awareness of the issue of how, exactly, to represent history reflects such beliefs. As such, in some aspects, Wang Anyi's fiction writing may also be understood as a quest for the best way to represent history that is closest to life itself.

Although Wang Anyi apparently shares the same penchant for minute detail, she strives in her own eyes to rise above Zhang Ailing by distancing herself from what she considers the unwarranted side of Zhang Ailing's "worldliness" (*sihu xing* 世俗性). Using Xiao Jiwei's interpretation, on the one hand, Wang appreciates the upside of Zhang's "worldliness", a literary humanism that pays passionate attention to "familiar, coeval and intimate life details". On the

⁵⁵ Wang, *Wang Anyi Talks*, 206.

other hand, Wang also implies that in those sumptuous details there lies in wait the tendency towards “decadence, vulgarity and triviality.”⁵⁶ In the early 1990s, the news of Zhang Ailing’s death triggered a tidal wave of interest in her works specifically and in Shanghai in general. Meanwhile, the Chinese literary scene was awash in popular fiction whose chief merit was its entertainment and commercial value, partly reminiscent of the commercial nature of Shanghai style literature. Some of these writings are characterized by flagrant female sexuality and a hedonistic attitude toward life in general. For instance, among these so-called writers is a small group known as “beauty writers” (*meinü zuojia* 美女作家), among them Mian Mian (棉棉) and Wen Hui (文惠), who themselves boast of being good looking women. It is as if a writer’s superficial appearance is an asset that contributes to the quality and desirability of the writing. With the birth of this new brand of writers, essentially, “the writer has changed from an intellectual, the conscience of society, the architect of the soul, to, at best, a celebrity figure in a consumer economy, or, at worst, a self-styled outsider.”⁵⁷ Clearly, such a trend is antithetical to the humanistic tradition that Wang firmly believes in and thus it must be disturbing for serious writers like her, who take pride in a realistic style of fiction writing and who believe in the social value of literature, to watch such a trend develop.

Ban Wang noted that the ahistorical nature of commodified literature that was sweeping through the Chinese literary scene is what prompted many historically-minded humanists to turn against it when it resurfaced with a vengeance in the early 1990s.⁵⁸ This statement applies to Wang Anyi. Against the backdrop of the onslaught of this popular trend of commodified literature, not only does Wang Anyi keep on writing in her own way, but she also steps up her

⁵⁶ Xiao, “Can She Say No to Zhang Ailing”, 515.

⁵⁷ Sheldon Lu, *Chinese Modernity and Global Biopolitics: Studies in Literature and Visual Culture* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2007), 63.

⁵⁸ Wang Ban, “Love at Last Sight: Nostalgia, Commodity, and Temporality in Wang Anyi’s *Song of Unending Sorrow*,” *In Position* 10, no.3 (2002): 679.

defense against the comparison between her and Zhang Ailing. Such comparison between the enduringly famous Zhang Ailing and Wang Anyi may sound to others like a compliment but, to Wang Anyi, it is not. One of the most forceful responses from Wang for such comparison is her essay, “The Worldly Zhang Ailing” (*Shisu de Zhang Ailing* 世俗的张爱玲). On the one hand, she reveals her reverence for the May Fourth writer Lu Xun. On the other hand, her implicit message seems to be that, Zhang Ailing, the iconic figure of Shanghai style literature, lacks the seriousness and social consciousness that define the May Fourth writers such as Lu Xun. In truth, Zhang comes from the lineage of Butterfly literature that is the successor to a long tradition of colloquial storytelling that dates back to the Tang Dynasty.⁵⁹ Naturally, the tradition of storytelling requires the material to be amusing to the audience, a characteristic that the May Fourth proponents repeatedly warned against when came to serious literature. Wang’s essay devotes itself entirely to the topic of Zhang Ailing as a writer through a broad survey of her fictional works of different qualities, serving, in part, as her rebuttal to the general claim that she shares the lineage of Zhang Ailing’s Shanghai style literature. In it, she first acknowledges her admiration for that fact that Zhang Ailing relishes even the smallest things and sounds around her, and has an uncanny ability to allow nothing to escape her senses. For instance, Zhang writes how she savors the smell of bubbling beef stew wafting from the neighbor’s house, the clamor of the daily market, the smoke from the little stove on the roadside, and the pleasure of walking on the sidewalk, right into the smoke-thick air. Interestingly, such descriptions could as easily pop out of Wang’s writings as well. From the article, one can reasonably discern that Wang appreciates, and is even likely inspired by, this side of Zhang Ailing.

⁵⁹ Chow, *Woman and Chinese Modernity*, 43.

However, Wang's main objective in the essay is to point out the trivialization that she sees lurking in Zhang's details, and also the overall "vulgar worldliness" of her characters as portrayed in most of Zhang's writings. Wang does not hide her distaste for Zhang's characters in general, implying that they are a somewhat contemptible and trivial group. In other words, Zhang's characters generally lack inspiring and likable qualities and are often selfish in nature, such as Cao Qiqiao (曹七巧) from *The Golden Cangue* and Bai Liusu (白流苏) from *Love in a Fallen City*. Wang makes it clear that the everyday details in her and Zhang's fiction have major differences. She goes so far as to assert that the famous Chinese writer Fu Lei's (傅雷) criticism of Zhang's works as being "vulgar" (e *su* 恶俗) is not at all unreasonable.⁶⁰ In Wang Anyi's critical view, much of Zhang Ailing's masterfully depicted details, such as her recurring scenes of endless rounds of Majiang, are simply boring (*wuliao* 无聊). In short, in Wang Anyi's estimation, Zhang Ailing's writings take the easy route, by jumping from the detailed description of the world (*details*) on one end to virtual meaninglessness on the other. By doing so, Wang points out that Zhang conveniently avoids the process in between in which ideals, and struggle for ideals matter a great deal. At this juncture, Wang Anyi makes it perfectly clear that Lu Xun, the leftist realist writer, is who she really admires because he bravely faced reality and searched for the causes of social ills through his writings.⁶¹

Not surprisingly, Zhang Ailing shares an altogether different cultural heritage from Wang Anyi. While the May Fourth movement and Soviet era literature helped shape Wang Anyi into the writer she is today, Zhang Ailing grew up during a time when Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies was all the rage; her fondness for the genre is well-known. Interestingly, Zhou

⁶⁰ Wang, *Wang Anyi Talks*, 319.

⁶¹ Wang, *Wang Anyi Talks*, 321.

Soujuan, one of the famous writers of the genre, was also one of the first to recognize Zhang's literary talent. In discussing Zhang Ailing's fiction, Nicole Huang has noted that both the Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies school and Zhang's fiction appropriate and invoke common themes from China's literary past.⁶² For instance, sentimental romances are a common theme from China's long literary tradition, and, unsurprisingly, are the staple in Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies fiction. Zhang Ailing's fiction frequently returns to the same themes, and often ends the story with a "sad ending." Of Zhang Ailing's major works collected between 1941 and 1945, one of the two volumes is entitled *Romances* (*Chuanqi*传奇, 1944), which might be viewed as a way of paying homage to a type of story popular during the Tang dynasty known by the same name. These stories were accounts of marvels written in highly literary language that primarily served to entertain. The second volume of Zhang's works, comprised mostly of a book of prose, is entitled *Written on Water* (*Liuyan*流言, 1945). Zhang recalls that she borrowed the title phrase from an English saying: "Written on Water." This is to imply that she does not expect her work to endure, but rather to fade away like words written on water. Using the second denotation of the word *liuyan*—gossip or rumor—she also hopes that her work will flow swiftly and broadly to reach a wide audience.⁶³

To be sure, unlike many other writers, Zhang Ailing views her work in a very nonchalant way. She steers away from the progressive May Fourth Movement rhetoric altogether. It is no wonder that the serious critic and scholar Fu Lei found her work unsatisfying and dismissed it as inconsequential and lacking in substance. Fu Lei professed that he was impressed by Zhang's talent and her impeccable technique in developing her story. However, his implicit criticism is

⁶² Mostow, *The Columbia Companion to Modern East Asian*, 459. Nicole Huang is the author of the article, "Eileen Chang and Alternative Wartime Narrative" (458-462). Eileen Chang is Zhang Ailing's commonly known English name.

⁶³ Zhang, *Honglou meng yan*, 2.

that her description of details is too petty and trivial and too feminine to have merit.⁶⁴ As noted before, Shanghai style literature is generally known for its frivolity and entertainment value. Such views are consistent with the May Fourth critics' general disdain for this "inferior" popular fiction that they consider merely "fiction for comfort."⁶⁵ Many believe its main function is simply to amuse its readers. During its peak popularity, Shanghai housewives with bourgeois backgrounds were known to be the top consumers of Shanghai style literature, and Zhang Ailing's works in particular were greatly admired. Zhang Ailing's work does indeed display the quality of readability and accessibility that seems to appeal to many, among them, ironically, Wang Anyi. Interestingly, in the 1970s when Wang Anyi unexpectedly came across a book of Zhang's fiction long before her work became popular in mainland China, Wang's immediate impression was that Zhang's novels were "pleasurable to read" (*haokan* 好看), and that Zhang was markedly different from the writers of the May Fourth period. While the May Fourth writers were keen on enlightening the masses, Zhang showed avid interest in the pleasures of the daily lives of ordinary men and women.⁶⁶

In general, Zhang Ailing excels at creating stories and summoning emotions from a chain of small, painstakingly drawn moments—an overheard conversation, a portrait of a housemaid, or a game of Majiang. However, her carefully observed details are not intended to serve a grandiose ideal, a point which she makes abundantly clear in an essay entitled "Writing of One's Own" (*Ziji de wenzhang* 自己的文章), written in response to Fu Lei's criticisms of her novel. She observes that many writers "choose to concentrate on uplifting and dynamic aspects of life

⁶⁴ Eileen Chang, *Written on Water*, trans. Andrew F. Jones (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 15.

⁶⁵ Chow, *Woman and Chinese Modernity*, 45.

⁶⁶ Wang Anyi, "Zhang Ailing to Me [Zhang Ailing zhi yu wo]," 张爱玲于我, *Book Town* [*Shu cheng*] 书城, no. 2 (2010): 5.

and neglect those that are placid and static.” The latter, she says is “the ground of the former.”⁶⁷ For Zhang Ailing, the “placid and static” aspect of life embodies the essence of human life. As a writer, she sees value in indulging in the portrayal of these everyday details in order to recreate a literary version of existence that she considers true to life. For instance, in discussing her perhaps most influential novella, “Love in a Fallen City” (*Qing cheng zhi lian* 傾城之戀), she points out the ambivalent aspect of her characters in the story: They are neither heroic nor inherently wicked; they are simply imperfect human beings. For instance, she insists that the Battle of Hong Kong featured in the novel could not make the male protagonist a saint nor completely compel him to forgo his old habits or tendencies. What the war does is to propel him toward a more settled existence. In the end, she insists that the marriage between the two main characters “remains prosaic, earthbound, and, given their situation, it could be nothing more.”⁶⁸ The details that Zhang Ailing so adeptly captured may be considered prosaic, trivial, or decadent. Nonetheless, in her view, they are essential elements of a life made up of “trivial things that happen between men and women.”⁶⁹

In addition to such divergent literary backgrounds, Zhang and Wang’s writings have more than a forty-year time gap between them. While Zhang’s portrayal of characters is multifaceted and appears to be realistic within its historical context, some critics including Wang Anyi, voiced criticism of the nihilistic outlook toward life in general and the pessimistic view regarding destiny that often permeate Zhang Ailing’s works. Zhang’s unhappy childhood and her first-hand experience of living during wartime probably also contributed to her world view. In Zhang’s own words: “I like tragedy and, even better, desolation.”⁷⁰ Zhang’s war time novella

⁶⁷ Chang, *Written on Water*, 16.

⁶⁸ Chang, *Written on Water*, 17.

⁶⁹ Chang, *Written on Water*, 18.

⁷⁰ Chang, *Written on Water*, 16.

“Sealed Off” echoes her outlook on life by vividly capturing the bleakness and hopelessness of human existence. Overall, while Zhang’s perceptiveness and her uncompromised understanding of human nature deserve deep respect, she allows her nihilistic tendency to overshadow them. As a result, her fiction often leads to a deep void leaving readers unsatisfied. On the other hand, Wang Anyi consciously incorporates details to support the larger ideas that run through each volume of her work, and her presentation of history is ultimately built on her effective use of these elaborate details such as Wang Qiyao’s life story. However, Zhang Ailing’s use of everyday detail seems to be aimed primarily at building the complexity of her fiction as well as her character’s individual subjectivity, whereas Wang Anyi consciously uses detail to serve a larger idea reflective of her position as a historically minded and socially conscious writer who, by and large, was influenced and nourished by the literary tradition of the May Fourth movement.

To further illustrate this point, let us return to *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*. As analyzed in the previous chapter, the novel should not be simply read as a story of an ill-fated former Miss Shanghai. Instead, the author intends to tell a story about Shanghai, the city, all the while weaving a sobering message regarding Shanghai’s future into the story. In this vein, what Wang Anyi insists on doing in her fiction is to imbue the everyday detail with a much higher purpose. She does not merely describe details for the sake of conducting a literary exercise. In other words, after she observes the details, she distills them through the process of aesthetic contemplation and eventually uses them to serve an idea that is the result of her contemplation. Meanwhile, Zhang’s lack of such progressive social consciousness can be glimpsed in her treatment of the short story “Sealed Off.” Through her description of the men and women caught in an unexpected moment of disconnection, she recognizes the space that the situation created for escape from the mundane day-to-day grind. Initially, the protagonists, Lü Zongzhen

and Cuiyuan, momentarily seize the opportunity and set the stage for an almost complete love story. However, the anticipated climax is not reached and Zhang Ailing forces her characters to retreat into their old routine without having made much of a difference at all: Lü Zongzhen arrives home only slightly later than usual and dinner is still waiting for him on the table. His life goes on virtually unchanged. Toward the end, readers realize nothing has happened at all during the sealing off. Lives will go on as usual. The ending, using Wang's criticism, reveals Zhang's deep seated nihilistic outlook on life in general.

Fundamentally, Zhang and Wang's individual approach to writing varies greatly, especially concerning the treatment of the everyday details in their fiction. To be fair, the two authors have shown extraordinary ability to recreate their own literary versions of Shanghai. These versions are suffused with detail and emotion that arise straight from of the world of ordinary lower or middle class Shanghainese people, whom they view as the indispensable constituents of the dynamic Shanghai life. Wang Anyi once commented that the petty bourgeois (*xiao shi min* 小市民) is the most significant group of Shanghai residents to whom the triviality of everyday life brings the most accessible enjoyment. The same could be said about many of Zhang Ailing's characters as well, who are as immersed in their daily life as Wang Anyi's characters. However, the divergent literary backgrounds and their differing aspirations for writing fiction all ultimately determine the very different way they execute the details in their writings. In the end, Wang Anyi's essay about Zhang Ailing helps to explain why, time and time again, Wang strongly rejects the viewpoint that her writings help fill the void left by Zhang Ailing and that she is the heiress apparent of Shanghai style literature.

Chapter Four: Conclusion

An Assessment of Wang Anyi As a Major Writer of Contemporary Chinese Literature

Ever since the literary critic David Der-wei Wang made the pronouncement that Wang Anyi is the “one following Zhang Ailing” (*Zhang Ailing hou you yi ren* 张爱玲后又一人) in a forward he wrote for the Taiwan’s edition of *the Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, Wang Anyi’s literary reputation has been irrevocably linked with that of her predecessor Zhang Ailing. Critics and devotees of Zhang Ailing’s fiction find in the younger writer’s work a glimpse of the bygone era of Shanghai life that Zhang herself so brilliantly depicted in her own works more than forty years ago. Also reminiscent of Zhang’s writings is the way Wang’s fiction draws readers’ attention through richly developed characters whose lives are etched with extraordinary, vivid detail. In truth, the time period in which Book I of *the Song of Everlasting Sorrow* was set (the 1940s) is one that the younger writer could only have imagined. She was born into the “new” Shanghai of the 1950s, and grew up during a period that was marked with relative peace and even prosperity. In comparison, Zhang’s life was a tragic one marred by the constant upheavals brought on by war. Interestingly, nearly a half decade later, in the 1990s, when Zhang Ailing “fever” swept through the streets of Shanghai and cities on China’s mainland, Wang’s literary rendition of Shanghai inadvertently helped to rekindle people’s nostalgic yearning for the Shanghai’s past. It is primarily through this seemingly inexhaustible subject matter, i.e. Shanghai, that the connection between the two writers can be firmly drawn. Adding to the myth of their connectedness is the fact that they are both native daughters of Shanghai who, through their works, helped put Shanghai in the same league as other famous metropolises in the minds of readers.

As frequently as Wang's writing has been compared to Zhang's, a critical reading of their fiction (as presented in the previous chapter) reveals major differences between their works, especially regarding their rendering of the details of daily life, a point that is the basis of much comparison between the two authors. Certainly, both writers write about their beloved home city Shanghai, and both, to an extraordinary degree, are able to turn the seemingly mundane reality of everyday life in Shanghai into wonderfully riveting vignettes. However, their similarities pretty much stop right there. An accurate assessment of Wang's writing and her position on China's contemporary literary stage requires a look beyond this comparison and a focus, instead, on her work in its entirety. Over the years, Wang Anyi has firmly established herself as one of contemporary China's most respected, versatile and formidable writers by maintaining a prolific output of consistently well-regarded works of fiction. Due to a constant exploration of widely varied themes and topics, her works defy categorization and reinforce her status as one of the most intellectually curious writers in China and, perhaps, the world. She is also noted for her insistence on keeping a low profile and being stubbornly devoted to writing serious fiction at a time when more and more writers choose the more lucrative route of market-driven popular fiction.

At the beginning of Wang's career, she was noted for exploring the somewhat taboo and controversial theme of female sexuality by publishing not one, but a series of three novellas now known as the "romance trilogy." In this work, a writer who is both probing and deeply observant emerges. In the same mode of exploration, she also turned her gaze outside of the urban confines of city life and wrote extensively about life in rural and interior China, mostly notably in her books entitled *Da Liu Town* (*Da liuzhuang* 大刘庄, 1985) and *Bao Town*. In addition, she also experimented with metafiction by writing a critically acclaimed short novella entitled

Uncle's Story. Furthermore, her persistent contemplation of the art of crafting fiction was chronicled in her carefully laid out novel, *Records and Fictions*, which explores her matriarchal lineage in an intriguing mix of both solid fact and ingenious fabrication. Her novel *Love and Sentiment in Hong Kong* (*Xianggang de qing yu ai* 香港的情与爱, 1993) explores the complex relationship between men and women through a love story about a couple who meet in Hong Kong, a younger divorcee from the mainland, and an older rich Chinese-American businessman from San Francisco. In recent years, she has broken new ground by writing several novels from the male perspective, perhaps to counter some people's perception that she is primarily a female writer who is only good at describing the feminine world. Among these works are *Heroes in Every Corner* and *The Age of Enlightenment* (*Qimeng shidai* 启蒙时代, 2007). The latter is especially noteworthy because of its exploration of the process of spiritual maturation among a group of privileged and restless young men growing up during the Cultural Revolution, a period in which Wang herself had intimate first hand experience and which she has continued interest in exploring.

Despite these detours, a significant amount of her literary output is devoted to her beloved home city of Shanghai, where she has lived for more than five decades. These works dissect and examine the lives of Shanghainese from all walks of life and are just as diverse in theme as those that take place outside of the city. Among her Shanghai oeuvre is her seminal work, *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, a sober and thought-provoking story of the city as embodied by the former Miss Shanghai, Wang Qiyao, and *I Love Bill* (*Wo ai bi er* 我爱比尔, 1995), an intriguing study of identity in an age of globalization as told by a young woman named Asan who frequents hotel lobbies and finds herself only attracted to westerners. Another story along these lines is *Fuping* (富萍, 2001). It is a little success story of a resilient new immigrant

named Fuping who eventually realizes her dream of building a family and finds her home in Shanghai . Even those who have read much of Wang’s work find that though they might not be able to accurately predict what her next work will be about, they can be sure it will most likely follow a road that is less traveled .

In further assessing Wang’s literary relation to Zhang Ailing, one thing that clearly stands out is the breadth of the younger writer’s work. The long list of Wang Anyi’s accomplishments, and the richness of her topics, stand in stark contrast with Zhang Ailing’s literary output, which was cut short: Her literary opus consists mostly of two volumes. Nicole Huang sums up Zhang’s major fiction as “the construction of an alternative wartime narrative” depicting life in a metropolis, namely Shanghai, against the backdrop of turmoil and war.⁷¹ Furthermore, it can be seen that Zhang’s central characters are often females whose lives invariably underscore a sense of tragedy and desperation. In comparison, it is practically impossible to reduce Wang Anyi’s weighty volumes of fiction to a glib line or two given their widely varied themes and the depth of scope. What is more, while Zhang Ailing’s major works can be summarized as tales of Shanghai, Wang Anyi’s fiction reaches beyond the physical confines of Shanghai, by including locales all over China, far and near. This she does very neatly when she traces her ancestry in her sprawling novel, *Records and Fictions*. In fact, writing about Shanghai may not actually constitute the bulk of Wang’s literary output at all. Furthermore, *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, the novel that, for the most part, contributes to the comparison between the two writers, proves to be distinctively Wang Anyi’s own. Wang Qiyao, the heroine, shows little resemblance to Zhang Ailing’s famous female characters such as Bai Liusu (白流苏) from *Love in a Fallen City*, who is forced to gamble for an unlikely marriage prospect when she is more or less cast out

⁷¹ Mostow, *The Columbia Companion to Modern East*, 459. Nicole Huang is the author of the article, “Eileen Chang and Alternative Wartime Narrative” (458-462).

by her rather heartless family, or Cao Qiqiao (曹七巧) from *The Golden Cangue*, who stands out as a deeply tragic and twisted figure who is not only desperately unhappy but also cruel to everyone around her including her own children. Zhang Ailing's heroines are often reduced to desperate measures while living in circumstances that are hostile toward them and in which marriage seems to be the only logical way to remove them from their unhappy circumstances. Keep in mind that a woman's life choice was significantly narrower during Zhang's lifetime. In comparison, Wang Anyi's characters' life stories are considerably more optimistic. For instance, the protagonist, Wang Qiyao, from *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, has been denied the prospect of a proper marriage and suffers through several hopeless love affairs. However, she proves to be capable of remaking herself in the new China and even supports herself and her daughter by working at home as a nurse. In addition, even in the leanest of times, Wang Qiyao is not left without an option -- she always has her security blanket: her secret stash of Director Li's gold bars. All things considered, apart from the superficial similarities between Wang Anyi and Zhang Ailing, it is clear that their writings are different enough to neutralize the claim that Wang is the literary successor of Zhang.

Considering that the majority of this thesis is focused on Wang's seminal work, *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, it is important to ask what the book really reveals about its author. In examining her comments in a collection of lectures devoted to the art of fiction writing, *The World of Minds* (*Xinling shijie* 心灵世界, 1997), one finds a crystal clear explanation of Wang's abiding philosophy about what she hopes to achieve through her fiction writing. On the first page of the first lecture, she defines fiction as the manifestation of an individual's mind. She argues that fiction's main function is not to recreate reality, but rather to reveal humankind's pursuit of the ideal and its aspiration for a more spiritual world. However, she also points out

that the building blocks for “the world of minds” (*Xinling shijie* 心灵世界) comes from the very reality that we live in.⁷² The reading of the novel supports the author’s belief in the ultimate responsibility of fiction, viz: to take its readers to a higher reality – the world of minds – that is built by the material from the life itself and distilled through the process of the author’s aesthetic contemplation. Her books set her apart from writers of market-driven popular fiction and further testify to her growing reputation as one of contemporary China’s literary heavyweights.

At first glance, it is easy to assume that *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow* is merely an entertaining tale of an unfortunate beauty who happens to live in a glamorous metropolis. This, however, could not be further from truth. Wang’s award-winning book is a serious attempt to tell a tale of Shanghai on a grand scale using meticulously researched materials from a Shanghai daughter’s life stretching from the tumultuous 1940s to the economic revitalization of the 1980s. The title of the book, the portrayal of the characters, the scope and breadth of the story, the language style, the pace of story, the ending: all of these prove that Wang Anyi is someone who knows her subject matter intimately and who is capable of delivering an ambitious opus that strongly bolsters her position as one of the most important writers of contemporary China. Her choice of title, *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, borrowed from Bai Juyi’s poem, summons up the author’s deeply felt sorrow for the way in which the city of Shanghai is heading with its mixed blessing of rapid economic development. Quite effectively, Wang Anyi chooses to symbolize the city of Shanghai using the image of an enigmatic and beautiful Shanghai woman who has lived an eventful life. By poignantly telling the life story of the protagonist over a span of more than four decades, she metaphorically transforms the tale of the ill-fated beauty Wang Qiyao into a portrait of a Shanghai that is spiritually empty but materially rich. Toward the end

⁷² Wang, Anyi 王安忆, *Xinling shijie* [The World of Minds] 心灵世界 (Shanghai: Fudan daxue chubanshe, 1997), 1.

of the book, the world that Wang Qiyao inhabits is awash in a sea of materialism, while the warmth of human relationships has disintegrated as it has been diluted by the obsession with material comfort. The process is illustrated so seamlessly that the tragic end of Wang Qiyao's life seems to be not only logical but also inevitable. From the beginning to the end, the pace of story is masterfully controlled and the characters are unforgettable. The author's language shows her in-depth knowledge of the canon of Chinese literature. On several occasions, including her choice of title, the author alludes to important literary works of China's past. However, it is mainly the graceful yet economical usage of language and her vivid descriptions of the protagonist's life that finally make the most indelible impression on readers' minds. In the end, the novel reveals a writer who values symbolic meanings in her work and who is also socially conscious and historically minded through her successful portrayal of Wang Qiyao.

Yes, Zhang Ailing has endured as one of most famous writers of Shanghai. But Wang Anyi has gone beyond this kind of fame; she has created and continues to create a literary legacy that reaches beyond the glitter and firmly establishes her as a serious writer - equally at home writing about Shanghai as she is writing about other locales. To truly understand Wang Anyi is to realize that she will continue to make new inroads with her fiction as she continues to reflect upon, wonder at and portray the world around her as she perceives it. She may not be the most popular of writers, but this is unimportant in her worldview. More importantly, she has proven herself to be a unique and formidable intellectual force who presents unexpected yet much needed perspectives on daily life in Shanghai and beyond.

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