

Matrimonial Complex and Identity Anxiety: A Psycho-Political Reading of Zhang Ailing's "Boudoir Stories"

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Abstract:

The conventional interpretation of the works of the famed modern Chinese female writer, Zhang Ailing (1920-1995), is generally couched in the Freudian psychoanalysis. This paper offers a new perspective of reading her stories through the angle of identity politics. In analyzing the paramount thematic concern of the writer's stories, which shows a profound matrimonial anxiety in a besieged society, it delves into the identity politics of her ostensible apolitical stories. It suggests that the matrimonial complex shown in the stories harbors an idiosyncratic anxiety pertaining not only to an individual identity, but also to a collective, class/national identity.

Key Words: Matrimonial complex, Identity anxiety, Zhang Ailing, Class/national identity

1. INTRODUCTION

The conventional interpretation of the works of the famed modern Chinese female writer, Zhang Ailing (1920-1995), is generally couched in the Freudian psychoanalysis. This paper offers a new perspective of reading her stories through the angle of identity politics. In analyzing the paramount thematic concern of the writer's stories, which shows a profound matrimonial anxiety in a besieged society, it further more delves into the identity politics of her ostensible apolitical stories. It shows that the institutions of marriage and love fallen in predicament is closely related to the intense anxiety of self-identity, which is pertaining not only to individual status, but also to a collective, class/national identity.

Methodologically, this paper takes a psychoanalytical procedure to understand her architectonics of signs and parables. This "psychoanalysis" is not necessarily founded upon a Freudian system of pathology, but bases itself on an understanding of the characters' mental-physical responses to the outside social-political onslaught. Once this procedure is turned into its allegorical counterpart in social space, her fictional style, a hybrid of traditional taste and western techniques, becomes a labyrinth of symbols and images and an elaborate mechanism to absorb the frustration and shock she experienced, which aimed to resist assaults on vulnerable individuals from a hostile environment. Consequently, her narrative is embroiled with a

profound ambiguity: Although there was no sentimentalism and nostalgia towards the past, the emotional atmosphere of a sense of regret and pity over the mundane concerns and strivings of her characters oftentimes permeates the narrative space, though with a sarcastic reservation sometimes, which underscores the sense of historicity of the narrative voice.

2. MARRIAGE AND LOVE IN PREDICAMENT

It is worthy to note that most of the writer's "love stories" in her anthology *Romance* are not about love as a romantic feeling and emotion, but are about desire, as the various episodes of flirtation, courtship, or affair have as much physical instincts its objective as economic consideration its stake. C.T.Hsia has perceived this dimension in his comment on the non-tragic nature of the apparent tragic and desolate romances: "Miss Chang professes not to abide by the classical formula of tragedy because it is her belief that the sheer weight of habit and animalism precludes the possibility of any prolonged flights of sublimity or passion."¹ Indeed, love as a romantic emotion oftentimes demands willing self-sacrifice, a passionate feeling of sublimity; yet more often than not what the frustrated physical and social desires in Zhang's stories bring about are nothing but many perverse pursuits and cruel calculations. However, these various apparent "inhuman" tricks do not indicate that the characters are less human, but they point to love and marriage as social institutions; and in modern China, these institutions have peculiar features and functions, which show the morbidity of the culture in an "abnormal" society. Four stories here are analyzed as case studies.

The real nature of marriage, being a social institution to ensure social security, as a sort of "long-term prostitution" for some women at the time is unveiled numerous times in the writer's essays as well as stories, which is more relentlessly expressed in "Aloeswood Ashes: The First Burning." It is a story about a woman who becomes spiritually debilitated in Hong Kong.

Weilong, a Shanghainese middle-school girl who immigrates there, in order to complete her study, seeks help from her well-off aunt, erstwhile a concubine of a wealthy merchant and now widowed. Yet her aunt is indulgent in seducing gigolos and playboys, so her consent of offering financial assistance to Weilong is harboring a concealed intention of exploiting the latter as bait for her to lure young men (later on she indeed snatches away one Weilong's admirer). Weilong tries to keep herself away from the nasty affair, yet she is soon submitting to the overwhelming material luxury her aunt offers, and then the physical attraction of George Qiao, a mixed-blood gigolo.

A notorious playboy, Qiao is the thirteenth son in his big family. His mother is a Portuguese prostitute from Macau, while his father has acquired an English title. Yet because he has stopped receiving financial assistance from his father because of his dissolute life and bad repute, he is by no means rich. As a young girl, Weilong soon falls to the prey of her desire by accepting the sexual advance of this good-for-nothing boy. Yet, immediately she finds that he

¹ C.T.Hsia, *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. 1999), 398.

also plays around with one maid in the house. Her hysterical disruption exposes her affair. To gloss over the scandal, Mrs. Liang arranges their marriage by persuading George that he can find an easy excuse to divorce Weilong when he has no interests any longer on her. Apparently a comfortable life is proffered as George's father renews his funding for his son because of this marriage.

Compared with Cao Qiqiao (to be discussed soon), Weilong's marriage would be what the former has dreamed of. The difference between them lies in her particular social status. Though the women both need social-economic security, for Qiqiao, who comes from declining households and without much education, material independence is the only concern; yet for Weilong, a student with a middle-level learning and being more open to modern ideas, she knows her own degradation: coming from a self-supported middle-class family, she can expect a more handsome husband with a higher social standing and reputation. She knows the true nature of his husband, the nature of the marriage, and the final unpropitious prospect.

So when Qiao teases her by insinuating that the European marines have mistaken her to be prostitutes, she admits that the only difference is that "they have no choice. I've done it of my own free will." She recognizes unambiguously the ruin of her youth innocence and the dire prospect of her future:

Beyond these lamps, people and goods there are sadly limpid sea and sky – boundless desolation and boundless terror. Her future is just like that – she could not bear to think of it, for these thoughts could only give rise to endless fears. She had no long-term plans. Only in these trivial matters could her fearful and agitated heart find some momentary rest.²

To find solace in forgetfulness by immersing in trivial goods and curios is the last resort for a helpless woman to dawdle away her decadent life in a colonial society. She has no way to extricate herself. This indeed is a desolation that wants salvation.

This degradation is brought out as much by the society and its culture as by Weilong's mind of calculation. For the former, Leo Lee has aptly commented, "Mrs. Liang...embodies a culture in Hong Kong which is stagnant and materialistic. George Ch'iao and his sister, both Eurasians, represent the plight of those doomed to entrapment in this culture, rejected by both Chinese and Europeans, save in a purely commercial setting. Thus, Weilong's marriage to George is the final burial within such a culture."³ Edward Gunn also perceptively points out that "ultimately, such a society is portrayed not for itself, but as a representation of the failure of the human condition in which the protagonist must either destroy herself or submit her vain longings to the

² Zhang Ailing, "Aloeswood Ashes: The First Burning," trans. by Stephen Cheng, with a few of my modifications, "Themes and Techniques in Eileen Chang's Stories," *Tankang Review* 8, no.2 (Oct 1977), 178.

³ Leo Lee, *Shanghai Modern: The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China, 1930-1945* (Boston: Harvard Univ. Press, 1998), 310.

destruction that life inevitably carries out.”⁴ It is of little doubt that the fundamental motive behind Weilong’s series of decisions (to stay in Hong Kong, rely on her decadent aunt, and finally resign to marry George) is a desire to earn her social-economic security and, if possible, to further her social advancement.

Similar consideration was taken by Cao Qiqiao, the cardinal protagonist in “Golden Cangue” (*Jinsuoji*), with a result more than a tragedy for the heroine alone. As the most acclaimed literary piece of the author, the story has received many perceptive analyses, I will only propose a different perspective: differing from the interpretations thus far which focus on the vulnerability of human nature (vanity, mammonism, and sometimes even sexual desire as the “golden cangue”), I will argue that her perversity is a result of the social system (in particular to the system, or the social institution of love and marriage), as her tragic fate is preconditioned – if not predetermined – once she is married into the family.

The endless series of formalities and rituals introduced throughout do not invite blissful feelings in the readers, but they bring about a claustrophobic atmosphere. This is an aristocratic family household in decline and its fortunes going down: they immigrate to Shanghai as refugees due to chaotic dynastic changes. The physical web and cultural institutions of the traditional-styled family household remain almost intact, appearing as ancient as an archeological site.

When Qiqiao is firstly introduced, she appears as the object of maids’ gossips, which not only reveals her original family background – located in the lowest social stratum selling sesame oil, but also exposes the cause for her marrying to this gentry family: she at best can be a concubine in this upper-class family due to her humble origin, yet since her husband is crippled and so could not find a woman of comparable fortune and social status, she becomes his official wife. The chitchat of the maids also reveals the reason that she is held in contempt by others, even by these maids whose status is lower than her. This is as much to do with her humble origin as the class habitus internalized in her unconscious, inscribed in her psychology, and shown in her behaviors: the slang comes out of her mouth is so improper that it shames even these maidservants. Worse, she is indulged in opium-smoking.

That she is so entrenched in her own class habitus also appears in the fact that, although she knows that she is despised by everyone, she is still actively urging the matriarch to marry one of her daughter out, implying that this can forestall improper affairs. Since she moves to an upper class she does not belong to, she is not used to its mores and conventions, but still holds ideas and habitus of the lower class and projects them onto her contemporary living circumstance. She wants to behave like an upper class woman, yet she doesn’t fit in the family. A tangential remark articulated by her niece affirming her superstition of the medical function

⁴Edward Gunn, *Unwelcome Muse: Chinese Literature in Shanghai and Peking 1937-1945* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 224.

of opium substantiates the fact that the tragedy of her degradation is partly a result of her poor and ignorant upbringing which does not match the life style of the high class she lives in.

Qiqiao's frustration and her own impetuous temper are attributable to her cripple husband, who because of his tuberculosis becomes a puny invalid. She has to repress her sexual desire in order to get the inheritance she is expecting for. When ten years later, the time finally arrives for her relief from her boredom and endless anticipation, it only turns out that her life of humiliation does not pay off. She does not get as much as she expected in the property-division; moreover, her dream for a better private life is thwarted. During these years, she has contained a desire for her brother-in-law. A good-for-nothing in his nature who plays around outside notwithstanding, this man dares not engage in affairs with her. Only when the time now comes and Qiqiao wishes to realize her dream, he arrives with an ulterior motive. Yet Qiqiao's feeling of sweetness swiftly changes to be a rampant rage when she suspects his sweet words are just snares to swindle her hardy-acquired money by catering to her fantasy of love. Her angry expulsion, however, is self-destructive as it not only destroys the simulacrum of love, but also her spiritual and psychological prop. Immediately after he leaves, she falls into remorse. The narrator here is completely empathetic with her feelings in an ostensible narrated monologue: "Today it is completely her faults. He is not a good man, she knows this. Yet if she wants him, she has to pretend ignorance, has to bear his perversity. Why did she expose him? Isn't the fact of living in the world just that case? In the final reasoning, what is true, and what is false?" This feeling of incapability to differentiate between the real and the false extends to a visual confusion: in this moment of trance, when she sees the shadow of various characters (a policeman, a rickshaw, a boy, and a postman) in the window glass, the narrator again presents her feeling: "All ghosts, ghosts of many years ago or the unborn many years hence.... What is real and what is false?" As her mind is enclosed by the golden cangue to secure material independence, her past, present, and future lives are leveled to be the same one and are sealed off. Yet the reason that genuine intention is equated with false perception, and veritable life with muddled living, can only be appreciated with the particular social conditions in mind: in this society at the time the demand of genuine emotion was more often than not compromised, surpassed by, and sacrificed for the imperative of survival; marriage as a social institution to a great extent is a necessity not of love, but of sustenance.

When this last sprout of love is pinched off by her, Qiqiao's life is a hopeless drift muddling along homogenous, empty time. Worse, her unsatisfied desire and yearning transforms her to be a ruthless monster that destroys the lives of her own scions. She keeps an ambivalent relationship with his son Changbai (who has become a docile weakling, having little schooling, and indulged early in dissipated life), requiring him to accompany her all the nights chatting, urging him to tell him the secrets of his wife. Unable to suffer the humiliation, Changbai's wife commits suicide. As macabre as this is the way she passes her own tragedy to her daughter, Chang'an, by treacherously crushing the latter's love in her calculated calumnies, out of her perverse envy of their genuine emotions.

This unnamed, inhuman malevolence towards everyone around her is her metamorphic revenge on the inhuman society. Although she never fits in with the manners and mores of the upper mandarin class she lives in, she turns up to be its most poignant spokeswoman. The transgressing of class boundaries makes her pay much more than she has expected, her nature is distorted in this process and she is devoured by the system, which punishes any unblessed attempts at boundary-transgression in terms of class division and distinction.

In this light, the story is a narrative elaboration of the macabre silence of a petrified history. In her malevolent struggle against the nothingness of meaning behind the death mask of history, Qiqiao arouses sympathetic and disgusting feelings simultaneously for readers, and the suffocating density and intricacy of this world is exposed. The silent, ghostly appearance of Qiqiao is an allegorical figure of the shadowy existence of traditional form of life in the passage of time. The residual way of life and its ethical straitjacket, appearing not as concept but as image and material concreteness, shows its aging face and merciless code. Embroiled with the relentless social conditions of traditional family structure and class hierarchy, the tragedy is decidedly antiromantic.

In this world, authentic passion is impossible, which is expressed by the question raised by the narrator again and again “in this world, what is real, what is false?” The misgiving itself shows the confusion of human emotion in a transitional society in which love and marriage, as “structures of feeling,” or social-cultural institutions, are drastically shaken and shifting. The narrative voice, due to a perspective of universal human nature, attributes the tragedy to certain historical/ahistorical cyclicality,⁵ as if this is an everlasting cycle with no hope of escape. Delivering the message of an everlasting cycle with no escape, it conveys the narrator’s pessimism on the inevitable fate of sorrowful human condition, which is deeply rooted in a belief in ingrained human nature regardless the permutation of history with its social-economic structure.

Yet this apparent distrust of love as a genuine emotion that requires self-willed sacrifice met a drastic turn in her third novel, *So Much Regret* (“*Duoshao hen*”), written in 1947. Adapted from a movie script “*Endless Love*” (*Buliao qing*) produced earlier that year, this is a story in a light, popular style, in contrast to the previous novels and stories which have strong flavors of traditional novel.

The story itself is a conventional, yet for Eileen Chang an unusual, love story. Jiayin is a twenty-five year girl, and Xia Zongyu a factory manager ten years older. Two chance occurrences help them develop emotional attachment: they meet by chance in a movie theater (a modern institution) at the beginning of the story, and later encounter each other again when

⁵ Thus we see the narrator in the framed structure of the story’s narration subtly expresses her opinions on this sad story: in the beginning she informs us that it took place thirty years ago (which means the late Qing period), while in the ending she returns to this moon imagery, bringing about a melancholy atmosphere of tragic continuity: “The moon of thirty years ago has gone down long since and the people of thirty years ago are dead but the story of thirty years ago is not yet ended – can have no ending.”

Jiayin happens to be introduced to work as a family tutor for Zongyu's daughter. Unfortunately, Zongyu has an uneducated and sick wife living in the rural area that he married earlier following the traditional practice of parents' order. In order not to harm the child, Jiayin sacrifices herself by pretending that she will return to her hometown to marry her cousin, while in reality she is leaving for a remote city to teach. Jiayin's father, a minor character in the story and an old, degraded philander, serves to accentuate Jiayin's selflessness: he tries to get his best from their relations, even by sacrificing his daughter's happiness with a promise to Zongyu that he could urge his niece to become the latter's concubine.

If not put in the historical context, this story would appear merely as a mediocre middle-class melodrama. The cause of the unfruitful love of the couple now is not a result of some evil, powerful figures, as what we have seen in the *Mandarin* and *Butterfly* stories, nor the reactionary, traditional force such as what had appeared in the *May Fourth* stories (Jiayin's father may look like such a candidate, yet he is not obstructing their romance). Living in a society in rapid transition, they cannot satisfy their wish only because of the hindrance of the residual social relations and traditional leftovers.

What is new that emerges from the story, however, is a new passion arising from this middle class stratum. Jiayin sacrifices self-willingly her own romance to fulfill the prospectus of this new institution of love (and marriage). Because she is now capable of financially independent (though her educational background is not introduced, she can work as a tutor now, and later will become a school teacher), she needn't rely on men nor her father to support her life, so she can entertain her romantic feelings and envision a promising prospect. A will to make self-sacrifice, a crucial element in genuine, romantic love, thus rises up. The author was so enamored of this feeling that she "felt a subtle attachment to this story." To this extent the story indeed can be said as a sort of "wish fulfillment" which the writer yearned for yet did not enjoy in her own life, at least until this moment.

Marriage as a social institution receives a different treatment in one of Zhang's early stories. Though "*Chenxiangxie: di er lu xiang*" (*Aloeswood Ashes-The Second Burning*) is appearing as a serial to *The First Burning* (they are the first two stories that the writer submitted to journal editors as her maiden work), and its setting is also located in Hong Kong, yet its content is vastly different from the other story. On the surface, the story is nothing but an incident about an ignorance of sexual knowledge by the colonial subjects that leads to a tragedy, with Freudian undertone of abnormal psychology. In showing the distorted, "unnatural" form of life under the strict colonial control and seamless blockade, the story is a disclosure of the hypocritical manner of the dominant class in the colonial society. But another dimension of the historical subtext must be brought in, which is also closely related to its prose style. Leo Lee noticed that the story is "framed in a third-person narratorial voice (presumably Chinese) that has subtly humanized and 'Sinicized' them." The result is that "the characters' speech patterns

are unmistakably Chinese.”⁶ How to understand this narrational choice? Rather than echoing Lee’s view that because of this arrangement “there is hardly an ‘alienation’ effect,” – the feeling of reading this story, with all of its characters being British yet their words and gestures “sinicized,” is quite weird and awkward – I will suggest that the author’s stylistic choice has a close relationship with her intention to conduct a subtle dialogue between Chinese and Western (secular) culture.

Edward Gunn has noticed that the author’s description of the female characters bear similar imageries in several places.⁷ While I agree Gunn’s perception that these skillfully employed imageries are probably used “to enhance the quality of the work and especially its central theme,”⁸ I think she might neglect the subtle Chinese reference of these images. These descriptions such as “a row of tiny teeth,” “so white they were blue,” and that “they suddenly shot outwards, reaching out as two-inched sharp fangs,” etc., will immediately invoke in the mind of an average Chinese the image of ghost which is generally regarded as “ferocious in appearance; with a green face and jagged teeth like a saw,” as the Chinese idiom “Qingmian liaoya” indicates. If we remember that Chinese at the time often referred to foreign imperialist invaders as “foreign devil” (yang guizi), such imageries in Chang’s stories might invite more associations.

These repeatedly occurring imageries show the evil side under the façade of seemingly innocent figure. Susie appears to be angel-like, yet to show her innocence, she does not hesitate to implicate Roger. Is she a devil or an angel? To be sure, for a certain discourse of humanity, the two sides coexist in human’s nature. But aside of the social cause for this ignorance which has been discussed, an allegorical reading is helpful here. This invites a subtle comparison between the Western culture and Chinese culture, in particular the mores of sex – we must notice the story takes place in a colonial land, and the community (a Hong Kong university) in which the tragedy appears as mostly Chinese. If the colonizers who allegedly undertake the honorable mission of civilizing the colonized, ignorant people, with their own treacherous life their hypocrisy is exposed, then the bankruptcy of its ethics and morality falsifies the grandiose narrative itself to a certain extent; and while the colonizers keep a strict, Victorian-style formidable more regarding sex, Chinese sexual conventions seem more “natural,” pragmatic, and so “civilized.” This comparison of sexual mores (as institutions of marriage) surely subtly

⁶ Leo Lee, *Shanghai Modern* 311.

⁷ For instance, Millicent is described in this way, “when she mentioned her former husband’s name, Frank, her thin lips curled upward, revealing a row of tiny teeth which under the light were so white they seemed blue, small, blue teeth... Roger shuddered.” Roger see the similar image in Susie, “Laughing, she showed a row of small teeth, so white they were blue... small, white teeth, but how beautiful.” And he sees this image again in his final moment of suicide when he is immersed in the gas: “...All that remained was a tidy ring of small, blue teeth, the teeth gradually fading. But, just before they vanished completely, they suddenly shot outwards, reaching out as two-inched sharp fangs...” Edward Gunn, *Unwelcome Muse*, 206-207.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 206-207.

subverts the hierarchy of cultural sophistication (modern versus tradition, new vs. old) between the colonizer and the colonized.

But this underlying cultural comparison becomes more obvious only in another story “Red Rose and White Rose” (*Hong meigui yu bai meigui*), which goes a step further to explore the overlapping and blurred boundaries between what is regarded as Chinese (but not modern) and what is modern (yet not Chinese), through the narrative vehicle of the writer’s staple theme: unhappy love and marriage. Yet the subtle sense of superiority is now apparently replaced by an anxiety, in the disguise of irony and mockery.

3. ANXIETY AND SELF-IDENTITY

The leading role of the story is Tong Zhenbao, an accomplished textile engineer occupying a high-ranked position in a foreigner-controlled company at his hometown Shanghai. He received advanced education in Edinburgh and has recently returned to serve his country. Shouldering the high expectation of the society towards Westernized social elites, he “is determined to create a ‘correct world’ that he can carry with him. In that pocket world, he will be the absolute master.” This “correct world” is also what the society expects of him, who has enjoyed the then rare privilege of studying abroad. But his unflinching conformity with social convention and order could also be seen as what he learned from the Britain, where the social rationalization has brought about a highly rationalized society, in which a British gentleman would be expected to behave properly in an unconscious way. So when he returns to China, he brings (and is expected by others to bring) this rigorous mannerism to his homeland. Cast in this light, his apparent robust will-power is a manifestation of a promising subjectivity. Yet in face of China’s social reality, this subjectivity collapses even before it is solidly formed.

The central plotline is Zhenbao’s emotional experience, alongside with his comparison, of various women. His first sexual tryst is conducted in Paris with a local prostitute, during which he sees her in mirror an image reminiscent of the writer’s description of the physiognomy of Western women in “The Second Burning,”

Her eyes were blue, but for a moment these spots of blue sank into the green make-up under her eyes, and the eyes themselves turned into transparent glass balls. It was a severe, cold, and masculine face, the face of a warrior from distance ages. Zhenbao’s nerves were jolted.

Apparently, he feels that he is threatened. At Paris, the “capital of romance,” this experience is unusual. What it reveals to him is that Western girl, or Western culture in general, is cold rather than passionate, like “a warrior from distance ages.” In facing with this image, certainly the master is the woman who has subjected him to her manipulation. Hereafter his impression towards Western woman is unsounded, which foretells his interests in and evaluation of various Chinese women. But before this to be unfolded, he needs another (Western) woman to test his caliber. And this one is properly to be a semi-British, semi-Chinese girl. Though she loves him

dearly, he controls himself not to consummate his desire. All the descriptions of his behaviors and mentality meant to show that he is “fundamentally a (traditional-typed) Chinese” who has no concept of gender equality; on the contrary, patriarchal, male-chauvinistic mentality defines his beingness in the world.

These two incidents may look like a sort of Bildungsroman for him, as from the first instance he grows up as a “man”, and from the second one he brings out a sort of “subjectivity” to control his desire. Yet according to Hegel’s master-slave dialectic, a subject needs to be formed via a subject-object relationship, in which the “object” needs to be one having comparable subjective spirit, which he can challenge with his wisdom and strength. As the girl with a half-Chinese blood is so free to accept men’s advancement, and too meek to spare him any stamina, Zhengbao’s “subjectivity” is not formed at this moment, not to mention that he always feels regretful for not taking her from then on.⁹

This girl bears blue eyes; “when her eyes opened wide, the whites shown blue as though she were gazing into the deepest of the skies.” Therefore, she is still too “Western” to satisfy his taste – her outgoing behavior and nonchalant manners make it impossible for him to accept her, as he fundamentally is a conservative man sticking to traditional Chinese morality. Thus when he returns to the motherland, he is a man equipped with both Western rationality and Chinese ethics; or, Chinese (morality) as his essence, Western (reason) his appearance. This is a dichotomized world, yet the tension is seemingly balanced very well in his split mind.

The story begins with a metaphorical description of two types of women: “there were two women: he says one is her white rose, one is red rose. One was a spotless wife, the other a passionate mistress. – Average people is always speaking of “jie lie” (chaste and passionate) by separating the two words. Maybe every man has had two such women—at least two.” Just as the phrase refers to a particular Chinese moral standard, we also need to subject this pun into the particular moment of Chinese context: his differentiation between chaste wife and passionate mistress is less from what he learns from Western experience than from Chinese tradition, especially the one since the late Qing period, when many gentry class men kept one wife and (at least) one concubine. In his time, this practice had been less popular, yet its residual influence was still prevalent: some allegedly enlightened “new youth” kept passionate mistress outside of the parameter of marriage. The New Culture Movement¹⁰ did not institutionalize new morality regarding gender equality in society. Even in the realm of marriage, many Chinese still managed to make the Western standard accommodate their customary ways of behaviors.

⁹ Hegel says: “what now really confronts him is not an independent consciousness, but a dependent one. He is, therefore, not certain of being-for-itself as the truth of himself.” G.W.F.Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V.Miller (Oxford: Clarendon press, 1977), 117.

¹⁰ Chinese intellectuals had long been engaged with various projects to rejuvenate the Chinese nation and its culture. From around 1915 to the 1920s, they launched a New Culture Movement. Iconoclasm and radical anti-traditionalism that vehemently attacked neo-Confucian values, superstitions, and classical Chinese language featured its dynamic momentum.

It is in terms of this phenomenon that here the narrator makes ironical comments on Zhenbao's personality, which would constitute a sharp contrast with what is to be happened: "Zhenbao is not this kind of person. He is always carrying things through to the end and in an orderly way. He was, in this respect, the ideal modern Chinese man. If he did bump into something that was less than ideal, he bounced it around in his mind for a while and—poof!—it was idealized: then everything fell into place." What this "idealist modern Chinese man" learns from the West is that he can develop extra-marital relations to a certain extent; yet unlike in Western society, where such an extra-marital relations can "naturally" lead to divorce and re-marriage, the Chinese social custom requires him not to break up the formal marital institution, but to uphold an upright image at any cost. Because in Chinese tradition, if a scholar visits prostitute or keeps a concubine, he can be called "romantic" (*fengliu*) and is forgiven by the society so long as he keeps his official marriage unaffected. While if he divorces because of his passion with the woman having affairs with him, he would be regarded as dissolute and irresponsible and would be reproached and despised. It is due to this strong conceptual restriction, which is "half-modern and half-traditional", that Zhenbao, as an "incomplete man" (*bu chedi de ren*, what the writer refers to Shanghai's "petty urbanite"), tries his best to fin in with the social expectation.

Therefore, although he submits to the temptation of his friend's wife, Wang Jiaorui, an overseas (Singaporean) Chinese and once a party girl when she studied in London, no matter how she loves him, and how she is willing to divorce for him and reforms herself to be a "chaste" woman, he does not want to discard his social mask and ruin his long-term career plan. Therefore, he goes on carrying the image of being an upright man and a promising engineer as well as a filial son that Chinese morality requests of him, and abandons her and follows the social convention to marry an obedient bride named Meng Yanli, who is from a proper family and also received college education, which was rare at the time. She gives birth to a daughter for him. Everything goes the normal track, appearing idealistic as the society expects. When the story opens, her daughter is nine years old and "the fee for her college education is already prepared."

Yet Meng Yanli is not a woman with the modern feminist consciousness of "lady first" and appears too meek and bland. She is even sexually frigid. Zhenbao soon loses his interests in her and visits prostitutes outside. What happens the next falls out of Zhenbao's expectation and control. Yanli's blas é towards her tasteless family life and her disrespectable status at home (she is so often rebuked by her husband and her mother-in-law that she is despised by her maid) leads her to having an affair with her tailor. Zhenbao, again, does not divorce her. But he falls into a more degenerate life in his private life. Several years later, when he meets Jiaorui again in the car, after hearing that Jiaorui has learned to control her desire, put down her vanity and led an honest and simple life, "suddenly his face begins to tremble. In the mirror he saw his tears streaming down. Why, he didn't know himself." Is he envy of her apparently "happy and genuine" (or rather, mediocre and vulgar, as she turns fat and less charming) life, the dream of middle class women? Or is he regretful over his earlier hesitation and his betrayal of his

“genuine love”? Differing interpretations of this seemingly unusual move aside, for him, life is still a painful struggle, which demands the self-sacrifice of his own happiness. So, after many times of dissipation, he “makes self-reform and changes again to be a good man.”

On the surface, with a subtle authorial intervention running throughout the text, this story shows the protagonist’s resolution and willpower. Yet nobody will miss the barely concealed satiric tone and the ironic twist, which reveals his resignation and willingness to settle for a more than unhappy life. In contrast to the impression the narrative voice strongly imposes on us, Zhengbao in fact never believes or views himself as a “good man,” or has unperturbed confidence in his ability to control his destiny; for he surely understands that his dissipated life, which after he discovers his wife’s adultery becomes more open and perverse, and his disregard of the welfare of the family (he refuses to provide spending money to his wife) would totally ruin his public image, and his incapability of controlling even his own behaviors, and further more, his family life, only show his incompetence in dealing with worldly affairs (according to the standard of the famed traditional Chinese saying which dictates the four stages of being a successful man: “to cultivate oneself and then put family in order, and then by which to administer state affairs and manage the world in harmony,” he surely fails even in the first step). His rash and futile attempts, like his tears trickling down before Jiaorui in the bus, exposes his feeling of impotence, enfeeblement, and failure. Yet the crucial fact that is generally neglected by most readers and critics is that, what he does not want to ruin throughout his career is not his reputation or his marriage, but rather, his long term professional scenario.

While the narrative voice seemingly holds an untouched, cold depiction, it now and then betrays a tone of ridicule, which belies its feminine overtone – this is a narration articulated by a feminine figure.¹¹ Even though this womanly voice cannot help but stand out numerous times commenting on the hero, what supports Zhengbao and his unremitting efforts is rarely explained by it. It is not difficult for us to feel that it tries to impose us an impression that it is Zhengbao’s vanity of keeping his face that he acquires a double personality and lives a double-sided life. To be sure, this voice also does not overtly shows that he is only a hypocritical man, but we need to go by ourselves to find the ultimate motivation that keeps him working with his idiosyncratic behavior, which the narrator apparently shows no interests to explore.

The story as whole is a story about some years in Zhengbao’s life. Although he is always perturbed and harassed by his own desire and outside enticement, and is always skeptical of himself, he has a strong will to maintain a “correct world.” He could not, but neither does he desire to, break out of the social order. What helps him maintain a united ego is his long-term plan, for which the narrator has informed us as “boosting his professional position, then after he has social status he would do some things beneficial to the society, such as opening a technical professional school for poor students, or building a model cloth factory in his hometown.” As

¹¹ For instance, she narrates that when Zhenbao considers his social responsibilities, he feels that “not only one mother, but everywhere standing in the world are all his mothers, tears full in their eyes, what they see is only himself alone.” There is clearly an authoritative intervention here.

social elite, he consciously shoulders this burden to contribute himself to the society, which is still highly bounded by traditional moral conception and falling short of rationalization. His anxiety, disturbance, dual personality and double life, and even both his hope and degeneration, can only be understood with these social-historical conditions in mind.

Yet towards such a self-sacrifice, the narrator, from a feminine or womanly perspective, keeps an ironic distance, and coldly observes his struggles and his failure. From this perspective, Jiaorui's later marriage life is "authentic," whereas Zhenbao's sacrifice is hypocritical and unworthy. His self-reform, as self-discipline of a middle class man to fulfill his socially expected goal, is regarded as unreal and is subjected to ridicule. But we can not afford to neglect the narrative irony: as a whole, this description of the "incomplete" figures, both Zhenbao and the two female figures Jiaorui and Yanli included, shows the incompleteness of Chinese "modern consciousness" promoted since the May Fourth era (or the inefficiency of the New Culture Movement as a social-cultural project), in which not only the concept of "new woman" did not, and could not, accomplish its ideal, but the idea of "new man" in general also could not lead to a fruitful direction of modernity. As a social melodrama, the story reveals both the moral hypocrisy of the Chinese middle class stratum (its decadence) and its inexorable struggles, thus finally speaking to the shaky condition of the semi-traditional Chinese society itself, which was stranded on a dubious and doubtful hope of achieving full rationalization, due to the intrinsic defects of the elite class carrying out the mission (Zhenbao, as noted, is incapable of "transcending his flawed vision,"¹² and is engaged now and then in self-delusion and dissipation). Put in other way, Zhenbao's failure to form his subjectivity is itself a symptom and an allegory of the failure to forge a new, modern identity, with the "bourgeois" reason as its core.

Zhenbao is a cardinal embodiment of modern urban business class from Shanghai. A product of the Treaty Port system and having received the baptism of Western technical as well as Enlightenment knowledge, this class distinguished itself from the older business class of the gentry-bureaucratic regime under the imperial order. Conscious of itself as an elite group, it committed to working on and building a modern business norm. Yet while this new class fought stoically against the harshness of the environment and its own limitations to create a new order, it nonetheless failed miserably. It is generally a consensus among historians today that the ultimate incapability of the Chinese bourgeois in modern China to claim its rights and privileges was (at least) partially the responsibility of the domestic regime, which "missed its vocation to assist and encourage, as States had done in the rise of Western capitalism, or because, by default, it allowed the country to slip into the sterile evils of militarism."¹³ This research calls into attention the troublesome relationship between state and society in modern

¹² Edward Gunn, *Unwelcome Muse*, 212.

¹³ Marie-Claire Bergere, *The Golden Age of the Chinese Bourgeoisie, 1911-1937*, Trans. by Janet Lloyd (New York: Cambridge University Press and Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, Paris, 1989), 5.

China, which is allegorically rendered as (inter-)personal psychological trauma in the writer's other stories.

"Jasmine Tea" (*Moli xiangpian*) is another story about quest for self-identity. This quest is through the identification of and seeking for a father figure. It is also a play crisscrossing the twin cities: the hero is moving with his family, an opium-addicted father and stepmother, from Shanghai to Hong Kong to seek refuge away from the Sino-Japanese War.

Nie Chuanqing is a twenty year old college student, who appears older than his real age yet is effeminate in his physique and spirit. He is nervous after he finds that his deceased mother, Feng Biluo and his professor, Yan Ziye, once loved each other. He becomes fantasizing that he would have been the professor's son if his mother (now deceased) was courageous enough to elope with Yan. He makes no efforts to improve himself but only blames his destiny.

This fantasy leads to his distorted view of Professor Yan's daughter Danzhu. Jealous of her identity of being the descendent of her mother's true lover, he displays various symptoms of paranoia: love, hate, jealousy, self-abhorrence, and even impulse to kill and self-destruction. Yet, as an egocentric adolescent, he does not love anybody, what he wants is to attain a weird love between him and Dangzhu in order to empower himself and to jettison his visionary, inglorious past. In one instance, he says passionately to the girl, "to me, you are not only a lover, but also a creator, a father and a mother, a new environment, a new heaven and earth. You are the past and the future. You are god." A seemingly narrated monologue helps to strengthen his sense of doom,

No escape! No escape! If there had been absolutely no alternative, it wouldn't have mattered. But now...he for the first time realized that over twenty years ago, before he had been born, he had had the chance for escape. There had been the possibility of his mother marrying Yan Ziye. He could have been Yan Ziye's son, Yan Danzhu's brother. Probably he would have been Yan Danzhu. If there were he, there could not have been she.¹⁴

Given that this absurd rationalization is possible only from a state of delirium, it can only be an indirect deliverance of Chuanqing's own hysterical thoughts. But is it really so? We further see that his paranoia metamorphoses to be an unreasonable impulse to revenge, which is enforced upon Dangzhu,

Chuanqing forced these words out of his clenched teeth: "I'll tell you. I want you to die. If there were you there wouldn't be me. As there is me here, there should not be you. Understand?" He clasped tightly both her shoulders with one arm, and with the other hand he pushed her head down so hard that it seemed as though he wanted to shove it back into her neck. She should have never been born into this world... He couldn't help kicking her

¹⁴ Translation by C.T.Hsia, *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction*, 409.

savagely a few more times for fear that she might still be alive...He ran as if he was in a nightmare ...”¹⁵

His resentment releases his anxiety, which is a projection of his envy of the “Other.” In his mind, this other also defines negatively his ignoble identity. Ashamed of his own family background (because he was born in this family, but not out of a crystallization of “love,” as the new morality of the society mandates), he simultaneously fantasizes of creating a “new heaven and earth” with this “Other,” and shows a possessive mania: what I cannot get, you also should not possess it. The resentment is a transformation of this envy. Thus he tries to push Dangzhu’s head into the abdominal space, which vicariously shows his own anxiety of being an abnormal human growing out of a deformed fetus.

How to understand this unusual story with such an abnormal mind? He is an effeminate introvert because of the repression of his oppressive, decadent parents, to be sure. In his quest for his identity, he is shameful of their past and bemoaning his lost opportunity to be a crystallization of genuine love. Yet that he releases his anxiety by abusing the “other,” the one that he cannot be, and his envy and abhorrence of the happiness that this “other” enjoys, exposes the fact that he is still deeply entrenched in the epistemological world that sees no alternative or remedy. His is a wasted life and ruined youth without the vista of hope and salvation, as this abject soul is merely desperately trying to recover its own ego, its own self-importance, which is devoid of any social significance. His future seemed doomed: at the end of the story, he learns that his father and stepmother are arranging his future by assigning him a wife. Tears running down his face, “He couldn’t escape.”

Without correlating with the social-historical experience, critics mostly resort to the Freudian interpretation of abnormal psychology to explain the incident and all his uncanny phenomena. This shows a general tendency in interpreting this type of story, which sometimes also correlates the author’s own experience. While these unhappy marriages, abnormal parent-child relationship bear certain relations with the author’s own family bonds, we need to go beyond these autobiographical elements to read it against the broader social-historical context. Insofar as the author has placed the hero against a peculiar Chinese decadence, this experience can only be examined from a class perspective in the particular historical moment.

Indeed, if we read this story allegorically by associating it with the social-historical subtext, we will witness more fruitful direction. It is due to the incongruence of family backgrounds – Yan Ziyue is from a merchant family, the profession of which is traditionally despised in the society and located in the lowest rank of the professional hierarchy: “scholar, farmer, artisan and merchant;” while Feng Biluo is from a mandarin gentry-class household – that they were not allowed to be married. It was out of this stimulation that Yan Ziyue left for foreign country to study. Yet although he had the courage to implement his will, the Chinese society still foreclosed his dreams: his lover dared not go with him together abroad for fear of public

¹⁵ Ibid.

opinion, and reluctantly married a rich relative instead; when he returned to his homeland after graduation, Chinese society did not allow him to advance his career. Instead of teaching the knowledge he studied from the West, he teaches Chinese traditional literature. His flights of anger in the class only release his sense of defeat.

Yan's sense of powerlessness and enfeeblement is shared by Chuanqing. But the latter's sense of frustration and feeling of anxiety is more serious: not only is he unable to inherit his "real" father's will to break social tradition, but he falls into the social web, where his patriarchal, old-styled, biological father abuses him, and his step-mother spurns him. His Electra complex thus is a search for a model Father figure to define his "true" identity. But though he is eager to looking for a new socio-temporal order, this world could not be found in reality, so his identity could never be formed.

Thus said, we still need to go a step further by linking the specific temporal and spatial order. The introduction by the narrator at the very start reminds readers that what follows is a sad story related to Hong Kong: "This pot of jasmine tea that I made for you may be too bitter. I am afraid the Hong Kong romance which I am to tell you is as bitter – Hong Kong is a fabulous city, but heart-breaking." In addition to creating a critical distance between the reader and the events to be unfolded, this narrative framework has stressed that what follows is a romance closely related with Hong Kong as a wailsome place. As a British colony closed to yet also aloof from its mother country, Hong Kong was at the time a place where many "old fogies and leftovers from the old dynasties" (*yilao yishao*) lived. Chuanqing's family there is from Shanghai. Like many leftover households in Zhang's story, they never catch up with the tide of the contemporary society.

In this family, Chuangqing received traditional education since childhood, so his level of Chinese culture supposedly should be higher than his classmates in Hong Kong. Yet even in the Chinese literature history class that Professor Yan teaches, thanks to his laziness and lack of confidence, he scores low and appears listless and shy. But only we correlate Yan's sense of defeat in his concern with the fate of the country, can we understand why he rebukes Chuangqing like this, "If Chinese youth all like you, China would be conquered long time ago."

But I will go a step further by proposing a hypothesis: would it be more inspirational if we read Chuanqing as an allegorical figure of Chinese juvenile bourgeois class, which, as a new, weak social stratum, was metamorphosed from traditional merchants and gentry-official class? Because this newly emerged, slowly developing class was despised and abused by the repressive, old-styled, patriarchal regime, a sense of being second-ranked citizens, without an authentic self-identity and protection from an upright forebear, transformed itself into an inferior complex. But while Chuangqing's perplexity with his bloodline, which shows her shame with his ignoble upbringing, can be read as the moral quandary of the bourgeois class towards their direct forebears, his entanglement with the past, indulgence in illusions, and refusal to confront the contemporary situation and reform himself shows the inclination of this class towards willful evasion of the reality. Meanwhile, his stubborn obsession with an

orthodox lineage, a “real” father, is simultaneously a search for an upright, spiritual father-figure as an idol that he can adore and study from, the duty of which his biological father, who, as a traditional figure addicted to opium, could not perform. Without a solid social-economic power and status, and the ensuing cultural-political confidence of its self-image and identity, this new class lacks virago and stamina. Worse, this anxiety can change itself to an impulse revenging the outside world, in particular the weaker and the more unprotected, for its own inferior complex, as shown in Chuanqing’s fascist inclination of sadism, which exposes his possessive mentality that wrangles with the world to claim the right and justice that he believes that he himself owns.

In this light, this story ultimately can be read as a story about two generation of Chinese intellectuals: the May Fourth type of intellectuals such as Yan Ziyi, who did not accomplish their dream and found no way to contribute their skills in face of the retarded, conservative society; and some post-May Fourth youths, such as Chuanqing, who lacked virago or even the will to reform the society as their inferior complex imposed a restraint on them. This obsession with an existential quest for self-identity thus persists in Chuanqing, an allegorical figure of the generation, who now and then feels that “there is no way to escape.” This sense of no way out is due to his entrapment in his own flawed vision and his incapability to accept the reality, a result of the stringent social-historical (including the familial) circumstance. As a weak and crippling youth, an allegorical yet personified figure, who owns no vision of breaking out of the predicament by self-reform, his sense of helplessness and doomed destiny is socially and historically conditioned and (over-)determined.

“Heart Sutra” is another story apparently about Electra complex, a pursuit for an idol as well as an object of love by another egocentric, adolescent figure, now a girl. Having an attachment to her father Fengyi, Xiaohan sees herself as a superior goddess. Like Danzhu, she also has a vanity to manipulate men. She not only successfully despoils her father’s love on her mother by sneering at the latter’s decoration and sign of intimacy, to him but also appropriates the love of her suitor Gong Haili in order to arouse his father’s jealousy. To appease Gong’s passion, she tries to be a matchmaker for him and her classmate Lingqing (who resembles her in appearance). But against her will, later on she only finds that her father has taken Lingqing as his mistress. It is clear that her father has found a substitute to avoid his incestuous feeling. She also finds that her mother has long ago discovered the affair of his father, yet remained silent to keep the family from breaking apart. Disappointed with the reality, “she suddenly has a strong feeling of disgust and horror. Who is she afraid of? Who does she hate? Her mother? Herself? ... She starts to cry. She has sinned.”

What does this story signify? The use of the title “Heart Sutra,” which bears a strong Buddhist connotation, implies that the evil quality resides nowhere but in human nature, and we see that self-deception and illusion is harbored by various characters. Xiaohan’s father has explained to her that her desire to preserve her security and the memory of his love in her childhood years accounts for her attachment to him. This egoistic consideration is born of her sense of

indulgence, and she refuses to be mature enough to enter adult relationship. The failure of her selfish scheme and the defeat of her extreme egocentrism belie the myth of individualism. However, this ethical complexity needs to be brought further into the social arena to be examined; only through this procedure can we understand the social cause of the psychological abnormality.

We first note that what the characters live in is a Western-style apartment building, with “a roof garden, rooms with glass doors, an elevator, and a long stairway.” Leo Lee has noted that “a Western-style house or apartment building is often the site of estrangement and disturbance.”¹⁶ It means that not only their psychological tensions are strengthened by the architectural designs, but their psychological abnormality an indirect result of the anxiety and anomie arised by living in a semi-Western locality, where stimulations of erotic desire frequently transpire in the commercialized daily setting. When combined with traditional decadent life-style, the erotic phantasmagoria can yield to a new variety of psychological disorder and incestuous instincts.

But if we go beyond this empirical inquiry and read this story as a social allegory, then the immature status of Xiaohan, together with her other friends who are seeking a father-figure for security, as well as her mother’s determination to preserve order without justifying it, all of which can find their symbolic import from the historical perspective. For instance, in regard to Xiaohan’s Electra Complex, a critic has noted that her

reasoning and lying are both evidence of the ... self-deception that she is above the human lot, that she is different and superior, that she can put something over on the world. In essence, it is to preserve the time in her life that was “the golden age” of seven or eight years past, the time of security and unquestioned love.¹⁷

This nostalgic remembrance of “the golden age,” this inextricable attachment to a father-figure, is a call for a custodian who can take care of the development of an underdeveloped living being; it is a psychological need of a sense of security, which is only a result of feeling threatened by alien others and precarious in its socially un-formed identity. Lingqing is eager to finding a man around her age to go out of her unhappy family, yet she is willing to be Fengyi’s mistress due to financial considerations. Xiaohan also once tells to her father, “You should have understood long ago, Dad ... as long as I do not give you up, you will not give me up.” This earnest petition is out of a juvenile sense of reliance and the ensuing uncertainty about her identity. But this ostensibly personal existentialist quest is merely a displacement of a social predicament, a substitution of a cultural-political confusion, and a projection of an economic necessity, with a distinct class nature.

In this light, these adolescents cannot simply be understood as ruthless people with no sense of shame, but their self-deception and flawed vision which leads to their degradation should be

¹⁶ Leo Lee, *Shanghai Modern*, 272.

¹⁷ “The life and works of Zhang Ailing: A critical study,” by Hoyan, Carole Hang Fung, Ph.D., The University of British Columbia (Canada), 1997, 126.

examined with the historical context and experience as its subtext and, furthermore, be read as modernist allegory. Their psychological morbidities springing forth both from their intellectual/political immaturity and economic dependency, their psychological and physical reliance on and callings for patron-like figures to secure their precarious sustenance of life, are an allegorical correspondence to the lack of economic and political power, sense of security, and finally a solid cultural-political identity of a newly developed, yet weak and unprotected, proto-bourgeois class, in an extremely precarious, semi-colonial, semi-traditional society.¹⁸

CONCLUSION

This paper suggests that the predominant thematic focus of the writer is a matrimonial anxiety, which aims to cash in on any opportunity unabashedly to transcend its class status to secure financial security and boost social status. This archetypal motif of Zhang Ailing's stories is leading to, and is also part of the reason for, an anxiety of self-identity. Due to the lack of rationalization of the society, and various domestic and international conflicts that were epitomized as the rhetoric of "war" under the writer's pen, a bourgeois subjectivity is difficult to be established. In its response to the crisis of marriage and love as social institution, this anxiety articulates, crystallizes, and projects the social-political dilemma and predicament. When this feminine concern is projected back to the broader social arena, from which the middle class man's vain struggles to acquire a "normal" bourgeois respectivity or an esteemed class identity are unraveled, the story is often narrated from the peculiar perspective. The feeling that "we have been deserted" articulated by the writer echoes this sentiment of a deeply-entrenched crisis.

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¹⁸ Similar analysis can be applied to the story "Withering Flower" (*Hua Diao*), which is a story about a girl with tuberculosis, having youthful dream for life and love, yet is deserted by the guardians, and as a result, her withering, which is also enveloped in a framework of a love story. Living in an unhealthy circumstance, the bud of an infant flower could have little chance to burgeon and develop. The love is limited if not inexistent, with much energy pulled to their interests. Life appears a desolate and unfulfilled dream in the middle class family originated from the traditional gentry's class. The lack of genuine care and selfless devotion lead to the early demise of a beautiful life. She never has a chance to develop her life form.

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