

**ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS AND URBAN MODERNITY IN THE
WRITINGS OF HAN BANGQING AND ZHANG AILING**

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ABSTRACT

Despite the vast amount of research done by Chinese and Western scholars on the writings of Han Bangqing (1854-1894) and, particularly, Zhang Ailing (1920-1995), there has been relatively little scholarship focusing on the connections between these two authors and their views on romance and urban modernity. This thesis seeks to address this problem by first exploring the connections between these two prominent Shanghai authors on three levels - personal, historical/cultural, and literary - and then examining how they portray romance and urban modernity in some of their pieces. In addition to Zhang Ailing's extensive translation work on Han Bangqing's *Sing-song Girls of Shanghai*, translating it first into Mandarin Chinese from the Wu dialect and then into English, a central connection between these two authors is the preeminent position of Shanghai in their writings. This thesis examines the culture and history of Shanghai and how it affected both writers. The thesis also focuses on the major themes and literary styles found in their works, which, as they exhibit a unique mixture of modern and traditional elements, is emblematic of the transitional periods in which they lived.

To illustrate Han Bangqing and Zhang Ailing's similar views on romance, this study examines Han Bangqing's late Qing courtesan novel, *Sing-song Girls of Shanghai* (1892), and three of Zhang Ailing's representative pieces – “Sealed Off” (1943), “Red Rose, White Rose” (1944), and “Love in a Fallen City” (1943). By exploring these works, the thesis argues that Zhang Ailing's interpretation of the modern urban romantic experience was heavily influenced by Han Bangqing's novel. Similar to Han Bangqing's writing, Zhang Ailing's stories are generally devoid of lofty romantic sentiment. Instead, the modern pursuit of romance for both writers is prosaic and, at times, selfishly

calculating. Finally, the thesis also focuses on the emergence of the modern urbanite, illustrated by the blatant imitation of Western ideas and customs by the courtesans and clients in the *Sing-song Girls of Shanghai* and concludes with an analysis of Zhang Ailing's desolate outlook on the state of the modern urbanite in her lifetime.

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INTRODUCTION:

Connections Between Han Bangqing and Zhang Ailing

Han Bangqing (1856-1894) and Zhang Ailing (1920-1995) were two prominent Shanghai authors who lived during different periods of unprecedented social and political change. Although their works are separated by nearly five decades, the connections between these two authors, particularly on a personal, historical/cultural, and literary level, are truly remarkable. While there has been extensive research in recent years on Han Bangqing and Zhang Ailing's writings, even to the extent that there was a field of study solely devoted to analyzing Zhang Ailing's works (Zhang studies) during the eighties and nineties, there has been little scholarship comparing these two authors' views on romance and urban modernity, as well as Zhang Ailing's involvement with Han Bangqing's *Sing-song Girls of Shanghai*.¹ Thus, through an analysis of these authors' works, this paper seeks to answer three main questions. First, how do Han Bangqing and Zhang Ailing portray romantic relationships in their works? Second, with regard to Han Bangqing's *Sing-song Girls of Shanghai*, what roles do the Shanghai courtesan and her client play in the creation of the modern urbanite? Finally, what does Zhang Ailing's interpretation of romance in three of her representative pieces suggest about how she views the modern urbanite in the late Republican-era?

It is the contention of this paper that a study of how these two authors portray romantic relationships can shed light on China's transition from a traditional Confucian society, where contact between the sexes was highly regulated, to a modern society that

¹ David Wang, "Foreword," In *Sing-song Girls of Shanghai*, by Han Bangqing (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), p. xviii.

openly embraced the idea of free partner choice and an expanded public role for women. Han Bangqing's depiction of the courtesan/client relationship in the *Sing-song Girls of Shanghai* is a useful starting point for gaining a better understanding of the incipient stage of this radical social transformation and the emergence of the modern urban man and woman. An analysis of Zhang Ailing's wartime pieces – that is, those written between 1943 and 1945 – is also useful, as it can help illuminate China's rapid modernization process during the Republican-era and the obstacles the country's urban population confronted in trying to come to terms with a world that was torn between the competing forces of traditionalism and modernism.

My research method for addressing the questions raised by this paper is primarily based on a textual analysis of primary sources. With regards to Han Bangqing's *Sing-song Girls of Shanghai*, I have used Zhang Ailing and Eva Hung's English translation of the novel. However, since the original prologue was not translated into English, I have consulted Zhang Ailing's Mandarin translation to make up for this omission. As for my analysis of Zhang Ailing's wartime works, I have used three of her more well-known pieces that were written during this period in her literary career: "Sealed Off," "Red Rose, White Rose," and "Love in a Fallen City." My selection of "Sealed Off" and "Red Rose, White Rose" for further enquiry is due to their similar themes and probing insights they offer on the modern urban romantic experience for both males and females in 1940s Shanghai. As for "Love in a Fallen City," it seems that no study on Zhang Ailing's writing is complete without an analysis of this widely acclaimed piece. Moreover, as it offers a slight variance to Zhang Ailing's typical depiction of romance, it provides useful insights for gaining a better understanding of Zhang Ailing's romantic views. My

understanding of these short stories is largely based on my reading of them in their original language, although I have consulted English translations when necessary. In addition to using primary sources, I have tried to incorporate the findings of secondary sources into the paper whenever it permitted.

Before proceeding to analyze Han Bangqing's *Sing-song Girls of Shanghai* and three of Zhang Ailing's representative pieces, this paper first seeks to establish a connection between these two authors on three different levels: personal, historical/cultural, and literary. On a personal level, Zhang Ailing's fondness for Han Bangqing's novel cannot be overstated. In her afterword to her Mandarin translation of the novel, she writes that she first read the *Sing-song Girls of Shanghai* when she was thirteen years old. In addition to *Dream of the Red Chamber* and *Golden Lotus*, the *Sing-song Girls of Shanghai* was one of the few works of traditional Chinese fiction that she would return to every couple of years to read again.² This late Qing courtesan novel also consumed much of her time during the latter half of her life, as she devoted a significant amount of her time and energy while living in the U.S. (1955-1995) to translating the novel from the Wu dialect into Mandarin Chinese, which was first published in 1983. In addition, Zhang Ailing also worked on an English translation of the novel up until her death, which, apart from the first two chapters, was never published.³ Her desire for the *Sing-song Girls of Shanghai* to be read and appreciated by a larger domestic and global audience is testimony to the high regard in which she held the novel. Moreover, as she spent the last few decades of her life living as a recluse in a foreign country, perhaps her

² Zhang Ailing, trans, *Haishanghua luo* (Beijing: Beijing chubanshe, 2009), p. 324.

³ Wang, David, "Foreword," p. xviii.

engrossment with this work of traditional Chinese fiction also provided her with cultural solace and a much-desired connection with her distant homeland.

On a historical/cultural level, the similarities between Han Bangqing and Zhang Ailing are quite astounding. As the works discussed in this paper were written while both authors were living in the cosmopolitan city of Shanghai, the influences of this modern city on their writings and personal life are profound and deserve further exploration. The importance of Shanghai on these writers is conspicuously demonstrated in the fact that the city serves as the setting for many of their pieces, with the exception of the latter half of Zhang Ailing's "Love in a Fallen City." In Han Bangqing and Zhang Ailing's literary world, Shanghai was a city comprised of people from all walks of life. In the *Sing-song Girls of Shanghai*, this is exhibited in the diverse backgrounds of the novel's many male characters, coming from places such as Shandong, Hangzhou, and Guangdong. In Zhang Ailing's "Red Rose, White Rose" and "Love in a Fallen City," the presence of overseas Chinese, typified by Wang Jiaorui and Fan Liuyuan, and foreigners further attest to Shanghai's diverse population. Thus, whether it was during Han Bangqing's lifetime or Zhang Ailing's, Shanghai was renowned for its heterogeneous society comprised largely of immigrants.

Shanghai was an appealing destination for many because it offered endless entertainment possibilities and temporary diversion from China's pressing problems. The dance halls, movie theaters, Western-style restaurants, large public parks, and world-famous pleasure quarters that serve as backgrounds in Han Bangqing and Zhang Ailing's works attracted people to the city from all parts of China. For the country's large, and mostly impoverished, agrarian population, traveling to Shanghai was not only a way to

escape from the violent anti-Qing rebellions, but was also a place one could possibly find employment during difficult times. Simplicity Zhao, the character that begins the narration of the *Sing-song Girls of Shanghai*, is representative of the rural migrant who travels to Shanghai in order to find employment. Finally, Shanghai's relative openness to people from different backgrounds offered many the rare opportunity to make a name for themselves or pursue lucrative business ventures, regardless of personal connections or family lineage. In essence, Shanghai was a city full of opportunities where a failed examination candidate, Han Bangqing, could become a professional literary writer and a young female writer, Zhang Ailing, could gain critical acclaim and become a cultural icon of the city.

Shanghai's status as a multicultural city full of a variety of opportunities was due to its unique position at the crossroads between Eastern and Western civilization. The establishment of foreign settlements in the city after the first Opium War (1839-1842) led to the incremental adoption of Western ideas and practices by the city's occupants. Perhaps nowhere is this more evident than in the relaxation of gender boundaries, which is exhibited in the assertive and defiant behavior of the Shanghai courtesan in the *Sing-song Girls of Shanghai*. In addition to creating a more liberating environment for women, the opening up of China to the West also led to the commercialization of the city and a fundamental restructuring of Chinese society. The works analyzed in this paper reflect this trend, as most of Han Bangqing and Zhang Ailing's male characters belong to the merchant class, not the traditional scholar class. In the commercial oriented society of

Han Bangqing and Zhang Ailing's Shanghai, knowledge of foreign languages and the world beyond China was far more important than classical scholarship.⁴

During the lifetimes of Han Bangqing and Zhang Ailing, Shanghai was a symbol of modernity. As many of the nation's newspapers and publishing houses were located in Shanghai, the city played a monumental role in disseminating ideas about modernity to the rest of the country.⁵ Both authors embraced the commercial culture that pervaded Shanghai by publishing pieces in popular magazines and newspapers. They were both professional literary writers that were not only concerned with creating works of high literary quality, but were also fully aware of the commercial aspect of their writing. As their livelihood depended upon the marketability of their pieces, they had to write stories that would be appealing to the sentiments of Shanghai's large consumer population. This is demonstrated in the fact that many of Zhang Ailing's earlier pieces were published in several popular Butterfly journals, such as *Violet (Ziluolan)* and *Panorama (Wanxiang)*, not ideological publications.⁶ Living in a highly commercialized environment where fashion magazines, newspapers, and advertisements were ubiquitous, Han Bangqing and Zhang Ailing adeptly utilized this new and modern medium, which was centered in Shanghai, to enhance their public image and gain a larger audience for their works.

Before proceeding to explore their literary connections, a brief discussion of these authors' backgrounds is necessary, as it sheds light on the modern urban experience during their respective times and the influences of the modern city of Shanghai on their writings. Han Bangqing's life offers an interesting glimpse into Shanghai's largely

⁴ Yeh, Wen-Hsin, *Shanghai Splendor: Economic Sentiments and the Making of Modern China, 1843-1949* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), p. 15.

⁵ Lee, Leo, *Shanghai Modern: The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China, 1930-1945* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), p.45.

⁶ Lee, Leo, p. 268.

immigrant population and helps to explain the motivation for his writing of the *Sing-song Girls of Shanghai*. Similar to most of the city's residents during the late Qing, Han Bangqing was not a native of Shanghai, but immigrated to the city in order to seek out a new life. Growing up in Beijing, his father served as a lower-level official for the Qing government. Han Bangqing initially aspired to follow in his father's footsteps and become an official, but after failing the civil service examination multiple times, he decided to move to Shanghai and pursue a career as a writer, contributing a regular column about Shanghai's world-famous courtesans in the newspaper *Shenbao*. Later, his decision to found China's first literary magazine, *Haishang qishu*, earned him the distinction of being regarded as modern China's "first professional literary writer."⁷ It should be noted that making a living as a professional literary writer in China during this period was a completely modern phenomenon that came into being only after the establishment of foreign settlements in Shanghai.⁸ His novel, *Sing-song Girls of Shanghai*, was serialized in 1892 and is in large part based on his first-hand knowledge of the Shanghai brothels and the foreign settlements where many of them were located.⁹ Thus, the novel can serve as a useful tool for gaining a richer understanding of Shanghai during the late Qing as well as the myriad courtesans and clients who occupied its pleasure quarters.

Zhang Ailing was born in Shanghai in 1920 and spent the majority of her youth and middle age immersed in the bustling environment of this international metropolis. Similar to Han Bangqing, her family had ties to the Qing government, as her grandfather

⁷ Wang, David, "Foreword," pp. ix-x.

⁸ McMahon, Keith. *Polygamy and Sublime Passion: Sexuality in China on the Verge of Modernity*. (Hawaii: University of Hawai'i Press, 2010), p. 101.

⁹ Wang, David, "Foreword," p. ix.

had served as a high-ranking Qing statesman during the nineteenth century. Her father, however, struggled to keep up with the rapid modernization of China and led a rather dissolute lifestyle, which eventually led to her parents' divorce. In her essay "Whispers," Zhang Ailing describes the things that she remembers most from her father's antiquated residence: "opium, the old tutor who taught my brother to write his 'Discourse on the First Emperor of the Han Dynasty,' old-styled linked-chapter fiction, languorous, ashen dust-laden living."¹⁰ While Zhang Ailing enjoyed some of the traditional elements of her father's house, most notably his collection of traditional Chinese novels, her father's dissolute lifestyle and violent behavior came to symbolize everything that was oppressive and outmoded about the patriarchal social system of traditional China.

Her mother, on the other hand, epitomized the new independent woman of modern China, as she spent several years traveling in Europe and lived in a modern-style apartment upon her return to Shanghai. Zhang Ailing's description of the modern features found in her mother's apartment, such as "a built-in porcelain bathtub and gas stove," offer a striking contrast to her father's old-fashioned residence.¹¹ The difficulties Zhang Ailing confronted in trying to bridge the two vastly different worlds of her parents is indicative of the modern urban experience that she writes about extensively in her works. In essence, her family can be viewed as a microcosm of Republican-era Shanghai society – a confusing mixture of traditional and modern elements that are largely incompatible.

In contrast to the wishes of Zhang Ailing's father, her mother encouraged her to pursue a Western-style education, which at that time had only recently been made available to Chinese women. In 1939 she enrolled at the University of Hong Kong to

¹⁰ Zhang Ailing, trans. Andrew F. Jones, *Written On Water* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), p. 156.

¹¹ Zhang Ailing, *Written on Water*, p. 155.

pursue a degree in English literature. If not for the Japanese invasion of Hong Kong in 1941, she most likely would have gone on to continue her studies abroad in England. Instead, she returned to Shanghai and began her literary career publishing pieces in English and Chinese in the city's magazines and newspapers. As many of Shanghai's writers had fled the city due to the Japanese occupation, her writings instantly filled the literary void and catapulted her into stardom.¹² The three pieces discussed in this study – “Sealed Off,” “Red Rose, White Rose,” and “Love in a Fallen City” - were all written during her wartime years in Shanghai.

The different eras in which these authors wrote their most memorable pieces were significant transitional periods in China's history characterized by monumental social and political change. For Han Bangqing, he lived and wrote during the late Qing, a period marked by the impending demise of the imperial system, which had been in place for well over two thousand years, and the beginning of China's forcible integration into the modern world, as a result of foreign imperialism. Similar to Han Bangqing, Zhang Ailing also lived during a tumultuous period. Situated in 1940s Shanghai, she witnessed a devastating Japanese occupation and a violent civil war between Mao Zedong's Communist forces and Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist regime. Thus, one of the most striking similarities between the times in which these two Shanghai authors lived and composed their most celebrated works is that it was on the cusp of epochal social and political transformation at the national level. Han Bangqing wrote the *Sing-song Girls of Shanghai* just prior to the utter dismantlement of the imperial system and the installment of a Republican form of government. Likewise, Zhang Ailing wrote most of her

¹² Kingsbury, Karen, “Introduction” In *Love in a Fallen City* (New York: New York Review Books, 2007), pp. ix-xii.

representative pieces on the eve of the collapse of the Nationalist government and the ascension of the Chinese Communist Party. These were momentous transitional periods in China's modern history and the writings of these two Shanghai authors offer valuable insights into these eras and a detailed description of urban life in Shanghai during these chaotic periods.

The final connection that this introduction seeks to establish between these two authors is on a literary level. While both authors wrote during periods of social and political change, the subject matter of their writings is largely devoid of political sentiment. The characters that populate their pieces are not national or revolutionary heroes, nor are they paragons of moral virtue, but are prostitutes, brothel patrons, shopkeepers, accountants, philanderers, and petty officials, all of whom live a rather pedestrian existence. These characters and their pursuit of romance in an urban setting was a subject that Han Bangqing and Zhang Ailing were both intimately familiar with and that held widespread commercial appeal in their respective times.

In addition to focusing on the mundane details of urban experience, Zhang Ailing's pieces also exhibit a remarkable combination of modern and traditional influences. Similar to her childhood as well as the environment in which she wrote her most celebrated pieces, there is an ever-present conflict in Zhang Ailing's writings between the pressures of modernity and the influences of traditional Chinese culture.¹³ This is not only exhibited in the storyline of her works, but also in her writing style, as it consists of a mixture of traditional and modern elements. Zhang Ailing's stories were written using *baihua*, the modern vernacular style, but they also incorporated features of

¹³ Lin, Zou, "The Commercialization of Emotions in Zhang Ailing's Fiction," in *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 70, No. 1 (2011): p. 29.

traditional Chinese fiction, such as narrative asides, the use of an omniscient narrator, and the traditional practice of using *xiaodao* (笑道) or *dao* (道) to begin a quotation.¹⁴ Her use of a classical poem from the *Book of Songs* in the flirtation scene between Fan Liuyuan and Bai Liusu in “Love in a Fallen City” is further evidence of traditional literary influences on her writing. Her adoption of these traditional elements was in stark contrast to the writings of many May Fourth intellectuals who argued that traditional literature and the use of Classical Chinese was “decadent, moribund, and antilife.”¹⁵

Similar to Zhang Ailing’s pieces, Han Bangqing’s *Sing-song Girls of Shanghai* exhibits a unique mixture of traditional and modern literary elements. The prologue to the story merits our attention because it sets the tone for the rest of the novel and is an excellent example of the hybrid nature of the work. In the prologue, the author, using the name “Flowers Feel For Me Too,” begins by directly addressing his audience and then warning them not to follow his negative example. The structure and rhetoric of this is generally in keeping with the style of other courtesan novels of the era. However, after this rather generic opening, the rest of the prologue diverges from its traditional predecessors in the author’s sentimental concern for the welfare of numerous flowers, a euphemism for prostitutes, who are tossed about on the sea, a direct reference to the city of Shanghai.¹⁶ This is also the inspiration behind the Chinese title that the author has chosen for the novel, literally translated as *Biographies of Flowers on the Sea* (*Haishanghua liezhuan* 海上花列传). Thus, in contrast to many other courtesan novels written during this period or earlier, which tended to vilify the courtesan and focus on her

¹⁴ Hsia, C.T., *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1999), p. 397.

¹⁵ Chow, Rey, *Woman and Chinese Modernity: The Politics of Reading Between West and East* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), pp. 88-89.

¹⁶ Zhang Ailing, “Translator’s Note,” In *Sing-song Girls of Shanghai* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), p. xxi.

immoral dealings with her client, this novel portrays the Shanghai courtesan in a much more sympathetic light.¹⁷

In addition to the opening part of the prologue, the rest of the novel also exhibits some traditional literary features, such as parallel couplets for chapter titles and a narrator who, at times, relates events in a storyteller style similar to traditional works of fiction. This is demonstrated in the novel through the author's use of narrative interjections, which function to move the narration along in a chronologically smooth and organized fashion. This occurs periodically in the novel to provide closure to one scene and help facilitate an orderly transition to another. In these types of situations, Han Bangqing accomplishes this through the useful phrase: "But there is no need to go into the details here."¹⁸

Another feature of the novel that demonstrates the influences of traditional Chinese fiction on Han Bangqing's writing is its blatant adoption of some elements from *The Scholars* and *Dream of the Red Chamber*, two influential works of classical Chinese fiction. The episodic narrative technique of the novel, which shifts frequently back and forth between different characters and scenes, is a literary technique that mirrors the one used in *The Scholars*.¹⁹ This narrative technique is particularly fitting for the novel, as it is emblematic of the fast-paced and capricious environment of Shanghai during the late Qing. With regard to *Dream of the Red Chamber*, the connections between this piece and Han Bangqing's writing, as well as Zhang Ailing's, cannot be overemphasized. From their interpretation of romance to the literary style of their works, Cao Xueqin's *Dream of*

¹⁷ Wang, David, "Foreword," p. x.

¹⁸ Han Bangqing, p. 149.

¹⁹ Hung, Eva, "The World of the Shanghai Courtesan," In *Sing-song Girls of Shanghai* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), p. 529.

the Red Chamber had a profound affect on Han Bangqing and Zhang Ailing, and will be addressed in more detail in later sections of this study.

The *Sing-song Girls of Shanghai* also possesses features that signal a distinct break with traditional literary practices. Eva Hung argues that the novel “stands as a landmark of literary innovation” for two primary reasons. First, its largely “unsentimental and realistic account” of the Shanghai brothels differs significantly from traditional fiction. Second, the author’s use of the Wu dialect, instead of Mandarin Chinese, for the dialogue of the novel “mak[es] it the most substantial literary work in nonstandard Chinese and a major experiment in evoking authentic voices in fiction.”²⁰ David Wang also calls attention to the novel’s innovativeness. He suggests that it “helped to modernize late imperial Chinese fiction at least in three aspects, representing a new typology of desire, an arguably modern rhetoric of realism, and a unique instance of the urban novel.”²¹ Thus, similar to Zhang Ailing, Han Bangqing’s adoption of modern and traditional elements in his writing is emblematic of the transitional times in which he lived.

Finally, both authors’ views on romance, which is one of the central focal points of this paper and will be discussed in more detail in the following chapters, differ significantly from previous literary traditions and the works of many of their contemporaries. Han Bangqing’s portrayal of romance in the *Sing-song Girls of Shanghai* diverges from many of the scholar/courtesan romances of his time and the traditional “talented scholar meets beautiful lady” motif (*caizi-jiaren* 才子佳人).²² Situated in the

²⁰ Hung, p. 529.

²¹ Wang, David, “Foreword,” p. xv.

²² Wang, David, *Fin-de-siecle Splendor: Repressed Modernities of Late Qing Fiction, 1849-1911* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 91.

modern city of Shanghai during the transitional period of the late Qing, Han Bangqing's portrayal of romantic relationships between courtesans and clients embody the commercial spirit of the city – that is, they are largely motivated by economic self-interest, not romantic love.

Apart from the mid-eighteenth century masterpiece of traditional Chinese fiction, *Dream of the Red Chamber*, perhaps no other work influenced Zhang Ailing's interpretation of romance more than the *Sing-song Girls of Shanghai*. Although the Shanghai pleasure quarters of her time no longer functioned as the setting for romantic adventures, she believed that “the taxonomy of desire the novel evokes had survived to become the emotional index of life in Shanghai.”²³ Lin Zou, in his study of Zhang Ailing's fiction, suggests that her description of human relationships is remarkably similar to that found in the *Sing-song Girls of Shanghai*: “genuine affection coexisting with interest calculation.”²⁴ In “Sealed Off” and “Red Rose, White Rose,” the main characters experience fleeting moments of genuine affection, but these moments are eventually replaced with the desolate reality that there is no place for romantic love in a highly commercialized and calculating world. In essence, romantic experiences for both authors are often equated to a dream in the sense that they are transitory, uncontrollable, and abstruse.



Similar to Hu Lancheng (husband of Zhang Ailing from 1943-1947), my fascination with Zhang Ailing originated with my discovery of her short piece “Sealed

²³ Wang, David, *Fin-de-siecle Splendor*, p.100.

²⁴ Zou, p. 33.

Off.” While studying abroad in China during the fall semester of 2011, I came across this piece in my modern Chinese literature class and was immediately enamored with it. In contrast to the other literary works that I had been reading for the class, which tended to be overly political and, at times, lacking literary refinement, Zhang Ailing’s writing was refreshingly unique in its nonpolitical focus and unconventional approach to interpreting the modern urban romantic experience. My fondness for this piece led to my decision to study Zhang Ailing’s representative works in a one-on-one class offered by my study abroad program during the spring semester of 2012. Reading many of her earlier stories in their original language was an exhilarating feeling and inspired me to pursue further research on her writings. The idea for writing my Master’s thesis about Zhang Ailing and Han Bangqing’s *Sing-song Girls of Shanghai* was first suggested to me by Dr. Keith McMahon. While my original plan was to devote the majority of this paper to an analysis of Zhang Ailing’s works, however, upon further reading of Han Bangqing’s novel, I realized that its depth and challenging subject matter deserved a more extensive examination. Thus, in fairness to both of these remarkable authors, the first chapter of my thesis deals with Han Bangqing’s *Sing-song Girls of Shanghai* while the second chapter discusses three of Zhang Ailing’s well-known pieces.

CHAPTER 1:

Romantic Relationships and the Emergence of the Modern Urbanite in the *Sing-song Girls of Shanghai*

The *Sing-song Girls of Shanghai* is a novel written by Han Bangqing (1856-1894) about the everyday life of Shanghai courtesans and their clients living in the foreign settlements during the late Qing. As a self-acknowledged patron of the Shanghai brothels, Han Bangqing indulges the reader with a vivid description of the manners of the courtesan houses and the romantic entanglements that inevitably ensue in this desire-filled environment. While deep sentimental attachment is not supposed to occur in this commercialized, promiscuous, and highly scripted setting, genuine moments of romance do transpire, reflecting the all too human impulse for romantic fulfillment. Through an analysis of the novel, this chapter seeks to answer two central questions: How are romantic relationships portrayed in the *Sing-song Girls of Shanghai*? And what roles do the courtesan and her client play in the creation of the modern urban woman and man?

The novel describes the interaction between the courtesan and her client as resembling a scripted performance, as their actions and behavior were heavily regulated by ritual and role playing. This highly systematic protocol not only functioned to enhance the power of the courtesan over her client, but also greatly inhibited the possibility for emotional attachment to develop.²⁵ For those who adhered to the ritual practices of the brothel, a realistic relationship could develop as long as the couple shared a mutual understanding in the realities of the courtesan/client relationship. Their relationship is labeled realistic in the sense that it is rooted in pragmatism, as they do not allow

²⁵ Yeh, Catherine, "Reinventing Ritual: Late Qing Handbooks for Proper Customer Behavior in Shanghai Courtesan Houses," in *Late Imperial China*, 19.2 (1998): pp.1-2.

themselves to indulge in the naïve belief that a romantic fantasy based on the “talented scholar meets beautiful lady” (*caizi-jiaren* 才子佳人) motif could ever become a reality in the commercialized Shanghai brothel. Benevolence Hong and Twin Pearl’s relationship epitomizes the realistic type of relationship that occurred within the confines of the Shanghai brothel. The other main type of romantic relationship portrayed in the novel occurred when the courtesan and her client became so emotionally involved in their relationship that they succumbed to the romantic illusion that they could transcend their environment. This is exhibited in the relationships that develop between Modesty Zhu and Twin Jade as well as Jade Tao and Water Blossom. Their naiveté is demonstrated when they become so emotionally attached that they ignore the realities of the courtesan/client relationship and foolishly believe that they could become husband and wife, an unlikely outcome for any courtesan and respectable man in late Qing society. The failure of the characters in these emotionally involved relationships to realize their romantic dreams illustrates the inevitable consequence of pursuing love in an environment that is harmful to its development.

An analysis of Han Bangqing’s portrayal of the interaction between the courtesan and her client in the late Qing throws light upon the makings of the modern urban woman and man. Living in a transitional period where traditionalism, modernism, and semi-colonialism were juxtaposed, the Shanghai courtesan and her urban male client of the 1890s were forced to navigate an ambivalent environment. As the characters of Green Phoenix and Benevolence Hong demonstrate, success involved an uncanny ability to adapt to the mutable environment of this international metropolis and a realization that the only person you can depend on is yourself. Their characters represent the emergence

of the modern urban woman and man who embraced the changing times instead of bemoaning the passing of the traditional order. My use of the term “modern urban woman and man” to define these characters is based on Leo Lee’s definition of Chinese modernity, in which he equates it “with the new Western civilization in all its spiritual and material manifestations.”²⁶ This is exhibited in the characters’ adoption of a Westernized cosmopolitan lifestyle based on conspicuous consumption and the courtesans’ desire to play a much larger public role. Failure in Shanghai, on the other hand, is the result of not being versed in the workings of the city, obstinately clinging to traditional practices, and foolishly indulging in outdated romantic illusions. The many courtesans and clients of Han Bangqing’s *Sing-song Girls of Shanghai* are performers on this new stage, and their success is ultimately contingent upon how well they can adapt to living in an environment that can be both enchanting and treacherous.

Nineteenth Century Shanghai

Apart from the author’s sympathetic portrayal of the Shanghai courtesan, Catherine Yeh argues that the *Sing-song Girls of Shanghai* diverges from its courtesan novel predecessor in the emphasis the author has placed on the overarching role of the city of Shanghai. The author’s conspicuous reference to the city in the title and the courtesans’ penchant for speaking in the Shanghai Wu dialect are further testimony to the importance Han Bangqing has assigned to this international and multiethnic metropolis.²⁷ Therefore, before proceeding to analyze the romantic relationships found in the novel and the emergence of the modern urban woman and man, let us examine Shanghai in the late

²⁶ Lee, Leo, p.45.

²⁷ Yeh, Catherine, *Shanghai Love: Courtesans, Intellectuals, and Entertainment Culture, 1850-1910* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006), pp.250 & 252.

Qing since it serves as the setting for the story and has a profound effect on the behavior of the novel's characters.

Following Qing China's capitulation to the British in the First Opium War (1839-1842), the port city of Shanghai, along with four other coastal cities, were forcibly opened up to the British "for the purpose of carrying on their mercantile pursuits, without molestation or restraint." Later, other Western powers, including the United States and France, would negotiate similar terms with the severely weakened Qing government.²⁸ As the articles of the Treaty of Nanjing suggest, commercial profit driven by the lucrative prospect of gaining access to the Chinese market was foremost in the minds of the Western powers. The aura of economic imperialism that characterized Shanghai during the nineteenth century is exhibited in a statement made by a Western manager of a large trading firm: "I hope to realize a fortune, and get away; and what can it matter to me, if all of Shanghai disappear afterwards, in fire or flood?...Our business is to make money, as much and as fast as we can – and for this end, all modes and means are good which the law permits."²⁹ The reckless and, at times, ruthless pursuit of wealth was not solely limited to the city's Western inhabitants, however, as many of the Chinese "comprador merchants," – that is, a new class of businessmen that emerged primarily to serve as middlemen for the foreign traders – also accumulated an enormous amount of wealth.³⁰

This type of cutthroat commercial culture that pervaded Shanghai in the late Qing had a profound effect on the city's occupants. Wen-Hsin Yeh contends that a rise in "economism" during the nineteenth century fundamentally altered the social and cultural

²⁸ Spence, Jonathan, *The Search For Modern China* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1990), pp.157-161.

²⁹ Dong, Stella. *Shanghai: The Rise and Fall of a Decadent City* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2000), p.15.

³⁰ Yeh, Wen-Hsin, p.14.

values of Shanghai urbanites. According to Leah Greenfield, “‘economism’ is a state of mind and a view of life in which issues of economy occupy a place of centrality...It distances the mind from the reverence of immanence and turns it towards the secular reasoning of calculation and transaction.”³¹ The status of the author of the *Sing-song Girls of Shanghai* is an example of how this new type of commercial culture saturated Shanghai society during the latter half of the nineteenth century. Han Bangqing’s decision to become a professional literary writer instead of aspiring to Qing officialdom marks a distinct break with traditional practices that parallels the newfound economism.³² The life of the Shanghai courtesan and her client, as portrayed by Han Bangqing, were also not immune to succumbing to the influences of this highly commercialized environment. The scarcity of the highly educated courtesan poet and the traditional Confucian scholar in the novel signifies a break with the past and symbolizes the commercialization of Shanghai’s courtesan houses, where “doing business” and accumulating wealth took precedence over “cultural sophistication” and a classical education.³³ During this period of paradigmatic social change, where status was based more on a person’s spending power rather than on their erudition, the status of the merchant was reevaluated and elevated in the public eye, often to the detriment of the Confucian scholar.³⁴ Living in this transitional period of unprecedented societal changes, the learned scholar was often no match for the shrewd business practitioner. For the Shanghai courtesan and her client, success in this transactional environment thus

³¹ Greenfield cited in Yeh, Wen-Hsin, p.9.

³² McMahan, Keith, p.101.

³³ McMahan, pp.105-106.

³⁴ Yeh, Wen-Hsin, pp.22-23.

ultimately hinged on their ability to adapt to the fast-paced lifestyle of the city, while also avoiding the pitfalls of pursuing love over business.

Another impact of the foreign presence on the city of Shanghai came from the establishment of “concession” areas by the British, French, and other foreign powers, which added an element of semi-colonialism to the atmosphere of the city.³⁵ While the land where the foreign concessions were located theoretically belonged to the Chinese government, it was administered by the British, Americans, and French with little interference from the Qing court.³⁶ As the occasional appearance of Chinese, “red-turbaned Indian,” or other foreign policemen in the novel demonstrates, Western law was practiced in the foreign concession areas.³⁷ The ability of the foreign policemen to exert control over the city’s occupants is exhibited when Little Rouge and her maids “dared not defy” the foreign policeman after he broke up a fight between her and Constance.³⁸ The presence of “garbage carts,” sanitation workers, gas and electric streetlamps, and fire engines further attest to the Western-style administration of the international settlements.³⁹ The establishment of numerous brothels in the foreign administered areas of Shanghai is a result of the security Western law afforded them and the protection they received from the Qing government, which forbade their officials from visiting prostitutes.⁴⁰ In fact, the ubiquity of brothels in the foreign concessions led many visitors to refer to the city as the “brothel of Asia.”⁴¹ The sing-song houses that Han Bangqing’s characters frequent are all situated in the foreign settlements just “over [the] Lu Stone

³⁵ Spence, p.162.

³⁶ Hung, pp.535-537.

³⁷ Han Bangqing, p.87.

³⁸ Han Bangqing, p.70.

³⁹ Han Bangqing, pp.13, 33, 85, & 87.

⁴⁰ Hung, p.538.

⁴¹ Henriot, Christian. *Prostitution and Sexuality in Shanghai: A Social History, 1849-1949*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p.6.

Bridge,” which served as a demarcation point separating the foreign administered areas from Shanghai’s Chinese district.⁴²

In addition to the commercial culture and Western-style administration of the settlement areas, foreign influences on the city were also apparent in the architecture, decoration of the brothels, and adoption of the Western calendar. Foreign-style houses and buildings, Western banks, Western-style hospitals, and large companies and warehouses were all part of the Shanghai landscape described in the novel. The prevalence of clocks in many of the sing-song houses not only attest to the popularity of Western products, but also indicates the adherence of the city’s occupants to Western notions of keeping time. The adoption of the Western calendar – that is, the seven-day week where Sunday is set aside as a day of rest – is exhibited in the novel by Prosperity Luo when he goes for a leisurely carriage ride with his favorite courtesan, as he had little business to attend to on a Sunday. While Western influences on the city and its occupants were ubiquitous, the rare appearance of foreigners in the novel suggests that they comprised only a small proportion of the city’s population and lived in segregated areas, which makes their occasional sighting all the more disquieting. The novelty of the city’s foreign occupants, particularly to a rural bumpkin like Simplicity Zhao, nephew of Benevolence Hong, is illustrated when he visits a friend in a “huge foreign-style house” on the Bund and becomes frightened by how many “foreigners were coming and going all the time.”⁴³

The Westernization of the city’s occupants is further revealed in the leisure activities and behaviors of the novel’s characters. As the foreign settlements were

⁴² Han Bangqing, p.1.

⁴³ Han Bangqing, p.103.

managed by the foreign powers with minimal interference from the Qing court, residents of these areas enjoyed newfound freedoms that were unimaginable to anyone living under the restrictions of traditional Qing society. Perhaps nowhere is this point more evident than in the relaxation of the gender boundaries demonstrated by the trendsetting Shanghai courtesan. Living in an environment uninhibited by the rigid social and moral constraints of traditional Confucian society, which segregated males and females and restricted the role women could play in public, the Shanghai courtesan was at the forefront in ushering in a new style of urban culture in which women enjoyed a much larger public role.⁴⁴ This is exhibited in the novel in the courtesans' penchant for taking carriage rides through Shanghai's bustling avenues and socializing in the city's public parks. Contrary to the Chinese administered areas of the country, in the foreign settlements, the residents of Shanghai "behaved freely in mixed company."⁴⁵ Catherine Yeh contends that the courtesans' brazen imitation of Western women, particularly their free and easy manners while in the company of males, was instrumental in the fashioning of a new type of socially acceptable female behavior.⁴⁶ Shopping in the city's many foreign department stores was another popular recreational activity that the courtesans and their patrons performed routinely together. Their conspicuous consumption eventually became an integral part of Shanghai's modern image. Moreover, according to Wen-hsin Yeh, it was the female's incorporation of Western material goods into their everyday lifestyle that ultimately symbolized Shanghai's commercial modernity.⁴⁷ Thus, in the foreign settlements of Shanghai, a new type of woman emerged, which is typified by the

⁴⁴ Yeh, *Shanghai Love*, pp.14 & 341.

⁴⁵ Han Bangqing, pp.67-68.

⁴⁶ Yeh, "Reinventing Ritual," p.49.

⁴⁷ Yeh, Wen-hsin, pp.68-69.

Shanghai courtesan, who enjoyed unprecedented access to the public sphere and was under far less obligation to adhere to traditional standards of behavior.

Finally, while the foreign settlements of Shanghai offered a safe environment that was highly conducive to business and liberating for women, it was also a dangerous place that required constant vigilance, particularly for someone unfamiliar with the workings of the city. By the time Han Bangqing wrote the *Sing-song Girls of Shanghai*, Shanghai's population had grown dramatically, as the city served as a safe haven from the many devastating rebellions in the countryside that were threatening to tear Qing China apart, most notably the Taiping Rebellion (1850-1864). The influx of rural, traditional Chinese, typified by Simplicity Zhao, to the cosmopolitan city of Shanghai offers a revealing glimpse into the stark disparity between China's urban dwellers and its majority agrarian population. Han Bangqing uses the character of Simplicity Zhao to illustrate the exotic, alluring, and enigmatic nature of Shanghai. For a novice to Shanghai like Simplicity, the city was highly paradoxical as it was administered by foreigners, had a large multiethnic population, but was mainly inhabited by Chinese. The strangeness of the city was further amplified with the appearance of women in public, Chinese dressing and behaving as Westerners, and the occasional presence of foreigners.⁴⁸ The proliferation of city guides that could assist a newcomer in navigating this dynamic city also attests to its unfamiliarity for traditional rural Chinese.⁴⁹

In the rough and tumble immigrant society of nineteenth century Shanghai, family connections mattered little; ambition, shrewdness, and ruthlessness were often the

⁴⁸ Yeh, Wen-Hsin, p.56.

⁴⁹ Yeh, *Shanghai Love*, pp.304 & 345-346.

ingredients for success.⁵⁰ As Simplicity's unfortunate experiences in the foreign settlements of Shanghai indicate, failure to "be on guard all the time" greatly increased the possibility of being cheated, manipulated, or even beaten. Benevolence Hong warns his nephew that "coming to this international city of Shanghai and having a bit of fun is OK," but a person should always be circumspect in their dealings with others. Benevolence Hong goes on to advise Simplicity that even though his friends are from "[their] hometown and should be reliable, they can't be depended on now they're in Shanghai."⁵¹ This illustrates the corrupting influence of the city on its occupants and the dangers that await its unfamiliar visitors. Therefore, while the city of Shanghai in the nineteenth century offered pleasure, entertainment, unparalleled freedoms, and the possibility of employment, success was never a guaranteed outcome. It is in this precarious and mutable environment, uncontrollably caught between the competing forces of modernity and traditional Chinese cultural influences, that the Shanghai courtesans and their clients of Han Bangqing's novel interact.

Courtesan Culture of Late Qing Shanghai

As the title *Sing-song Girls of Shanghai* indicates, Shanghai courtesans are the primary subject matter of Han Bangqing's novel, thus a brief exploration of prostitution and the courtesan culture of late Qing Shanghai is essential. In order to provide some historical context, which will be useful in highlighting the evolving role of Shanghai courtesans during the nineteenth century, this section begins with a brief analysis of traditional Chinese courtesan culture.

⁵⁰ Dong, Stella, p.20.

⁵¹ Han Bangqing, pp.99 & 102.

Many of the elite courtesans in late Qing China were highly educated women who were valued for their artistic and cultural talents. These women were seen as artists who provided cultural entertainment to their clients, not simply as prostitutes whose sole function was sexual gratification. As cultural entertainers, their role was to provide their clients with company at restaurants and banquets, serve wine, and enhance the atmosphere through song and music. Christian Henriot, through his use of the phrase the “four cardinal points of the world of the courtesans,” provides a useful framework for understanding the public world of the nineteenth-century Shanghai courtesan. The “four cardinal points” are the *shuchang* (traditional music hall), theatre, restaurant, and teahouse.⁵² Operating within these “four cardinal points,” the cultural and artistic talents of elite courtesans allowed them to maintain a competitive advantage over the less-cultured prostitutes of inferior rank. The superior status of the elite courtesan in late Qing China was further bolstered by the fact that entry into the highest ranks of courtesans was highly competitive and selective, as candidates were sometimes required to participate in a large competition that was aimed at testing their artistic abilities. The presence of a small group of elite courtesans who were characterized by their erudition and cultural refinement attests to the existence of a discerning male clientele. While their patrons, most of whom were affluent members of the gentry from different parts of China, expected to receive sexual fulfillment from their courtship, they initially sought to establish a long-term relationship largely based on her cultural and artistic reputation, which would in turn enhance their social standing.⁵³ However, as the following analysis will indicate, the rapidly changing social and cultural environment of the Shanghai

⁵² Henriot, p.37.

⁵³ Henriot, pp.22-25.

settlements during the nineteenth century led to a fundamental restructuring of the courtesans' world. For elite courtesans, this meant that acquiring skills aimed at making them professional entertainers became far more important than erudition and cultural refinement.

Situated in the foreign settlements of the city, the Shanghai courtesans of the late Qing were able to operate in an environment largely free from traditional restrictions imposed by the Qing government. As a result, by the 1880s, prostitutes composed approximately one-eighth of the female population living in the foreign settlements.⁵⁴ Operating in the more liberated areas of the city, the courtesan quickly became an integral part of Shanghai's modern identity, as her activities gradually expanded into the public domain.⁵⁵ The leisure activities of the Shanghai courtesans portrayed in the novel largely take place within Christian Henriot's "four cardinal points," though it should be pointed out that riding in Western-style open carriages and socializing in public parks were two other important public activities of the Shanghai courtesan. With the increasing Westernization of the city's occupants, two of the "four cardinal points" – the restaurant and the teahouse - would eventually be replaced by coffee houses and department stores.⁵⁶

Unencumbered by traditional restrictions placed on Chinese women from respectable families, the Shanghai courtesan was afforded greater freedom to move around in public. She utilized these public appearances to enhance her reputation and create a new, highly marketable public image. In so doing, she also inadvertently played a role in opening up the public realm for other women. Her emergence on the public

⁵⁴ Wang, *Fin-de-seicle Splendor*, p.97.

⁵⁵ Yeh, "Reinventing Ritual," p.1.

⁵⁶ Henriot, p.37.

scene, whether it was riding through Shanghai's bustling streets in an open carriage or performing on stage, paved the way for respectable women to follow.⁵⁷ Shanghai courtesans were also at the forefront in women's fashion, as their dress and adoption of different styles was minutely monitored and often became the standard for how a modern female urbanite should dress.⁵⁸ The ubiquity of courtesan guides and narratives attest to the popularity and celebrity-like status of the Shanghai courtesans. By the time Han Bangqing began to write the *Sing-song Girls of Shanghai*, courtesans had already become one of the city's largest tourist attractions, as they symbolized everything that was pleasurable, desirable, and exotic in the modern international city of Shanghai.⁵⁹

While the first-class courtesans enjoyed their status as the cultural icons of the city, their entry into prostitution, however, was anything but glamorous. Many of them became prostitutes out of dire necessity due to poverty, or were sold to brothels by relatives or human traffickers.⁶⁰ The demand for youthful looking courtesans meant that a courtesan could expect to remain in her profession for only five to ten years before she would be deserted by her clients. This added a considerable amount of anxiety to the courtesans' daily life, as the only way to escape the brothel was through marriage or to become economically independent. When a young girl was sold to a brothel, she was required to pay a ransom if she ever wanted to leave the establishment. However, since she was only permitted to keep gifts that customers had given her, as her official earnings belonged to the madam, the ability to buy oneself out of servitude was an arduous task. It was only the superior courtesans, that is the ones who possessed uncanny business

⁵⁷ Yeh, *Shanghai Love*, p.342.

⁵⁸ Henriot, p.50.

⁵⁹ Yeh, "Reinventing Ritual," pp.1 & 11.

⁶⁰ Hung, p.542.

acumen and could secure the favors of wealthy clients, who were able to save up enough money to purchase their freedom.⁶¹ Green Phoenix buying her freedom from her madam, Second Sister, is an example of this practice. The exorbitant amount of money that she was required to pay – one thousand dollars plus the forfeiture of clothing and jewelry “worth ten thousand dollars” – illustrates her route was only available to a select few.⁶² For those who entered the establishment of their own accord, they were required to “redeem” themselves, which meant paying any outstanding debts they might have incurred while residing in the brothel.⁶³

Since acquiring economic independence was not a viable option for many Shanghai courtesans, marriage offered a rare opportunity to exit the courtesan business without having to amass a fortune. Marrying a courtesan, however, was often a particularly costly affair for a client, as he had to purchase her freedom from her madam and pay any outstanding debts that she may have incurred. This meant that only an affluent customer, most likely a member of the gentry or a wealthy merchant, could afford marrying a courtesan. As these men often had a main wife and concubines, it was impossible, and socially unacceptable anyway, for a courtesan to accede to the rank of a main wife. In this situation, the courtesan could only aspire to become a concubine, a position that made her subservient to her husband’s main wife and even other concubines. Moreover, becoming a concubine of a respectable man meant that her freedoms would be severely curtailed, as she would be confined to a restricted area in her husband’s house.⁶⁴ The only courtesan who is able to assume the rank of wife in Han Bangqing’s novel is

⁶¹ Henriot, pp. 28 & 32.

⁶² Han Bangqing, p.393.

⁶³ Yeh, “Reinventing Ritual,” p.31.

⁶⁴ Henriot, pp.59-61.

Laurel, an opium addict who is derided by the novel's affluent and respectable clients. Her marriage to Thatch Fang, an outmoded client whose culture and erudition is a veneer, represents a marriage of convenience, and is anything but the product of an ideal love affair.

Considering that marriage did not necessarily offer the Shanghai courtesan salvation, her ultimate goal was thus to save up enough money to purchase her freedom and guarantee her permanent economic independence.⁶⁵ Bright Pearl and Green Phoenix epitomize this type of successful prostitute. While Bright Pearl is described as “going bald at the forehead” and missing “most of her teeth” due to her advanced age, she is a successful prostitute in the sense that she has amassed a fortune and is completely self-sufficient by becoming a manager of a brothel.⁶⁶ Green Phoenix, similar to Bright Pearl, is also able to buy her freedom and maintain her economic independence by managing a brothel of her own. Their decisions to manage their own prostitution establishments suggest that independence was more desirable to the elite courtesan than any amount of security marriage might entail. However, the fact that they represent only two courtesans out of the scores depicted in the novel symbolizes the scarcity of the successful prostitute in late Qing Shanghai.

While the lives of many first-class courtesans, as depicted by Han Bangqing, appear to be enchanting and luxurious, most Shanghai prostitutes, however, belonged to a lower status. As the world of prostitution is highly responsive to social, economic, and political changes, an examination of the stratification of Shanghai prostitution can yield valuable insights into the brisk process of modernization that Shanghai experienced

⁶⁵ McMahan, p.107.

⁶⁶ Han Bangqing, p.121.

following the Opium Wars. The commercialization of the city's occupants, as discussed earlier in this chapter, led to a fundamental restructuring of Shanghai society where money became more important than status. In response to these paradigmatic social changes, the status of the high-class courtesan declined, ultimately leading to the creation of different forms of prostitution to meet the demands of an increasingly economically diversified male population, exemplified by the emergence of the middle class. The conspicuous absence of the well-educated courtesan poet in Han Bangqing's novel illustrates this trend toward greater commercialization of the culture of the Shanghai prostitute. As economics eclipsed cultural refinement and erudition in Shanghai society, so too did the courtesan adept at entertaining eclipse the intellectual courtesan. Thus, the courtesans in the *Sing-song Girls of Shanghai* are not well-educated. Instead, they are taught how to sing, play games, and occasionally play a musical instrument, skills aimed at making them entertainers, not scholars.⁶⁷ The presence of "opium den girls," "street walker[s]," first-class courtesans, and second-class courtesans in the novel further illustrate the commercialization and stratification of Shanghai prostitution during the late Qing.⁶⁸

Han Bangqing vividly depicts the differences between these various types of Shanghai prostitutes throughout the novel. The "opium den girl," "streetwalker," and "game bird" all refer to the lowest type of Shanghai prostitute. These women were characterized by their uncouth manners and wanton behavior with customers. Han Bangqing describes them as "making spectacles of themselves," as they would frequently

⁶⁷ Henriot, pp.1, 21, 25, 30, 32, & 354.

⁶⁸ Han Bangqing, pp.35 & 37.

“joke with and tease potential clients” in public places.⁶⁹ Their place of business offers a striking contrast to the more refined brothel of the first-class Shanghai courtesans. Instead of being commodious and elaborately decorated with exquisite furniture and foreign curios, “space [in their room] was so cramped [that] there wasn’t even room for a table.”⁷⁰ Moreover, in order to please opium-smoking customers, they would often use a “makeshift opium divan,” which consisted of “just some boards set up on a couple of benches.”⁷¹ These types of prostitutes were appealing largely because they were easily accessible, inexpensive, and did not require their customers to establish a long-term relationship with them. As opposed to first-class and second-class courtesans, their primary function was sexual gratification, not entertainment. However, as Pragmatic Li’s experience with Perfection Chu illustrates, involvement with a “game bird” could also carry the risk of contracting “a little ailment” – that is, a venereal disease.⁷²

While Han Bangqing devotes part of his work to describing the lower types of Shanghai prostitutes, the majority of the courtesans in the *Sing-song Girls of Shanghai* are first-class courtesans. Operating in a highly diversified and competitive environment, first-class courtesans sought to strengthen their competitive advantage by maintaining an aura of refinement and inaccessibility. In contrast to the popularized image of prostitutes as sexual commodities, establishing a relationship with an elite courtesan was anything but a simple affair, as it involved an introduction by a third party and a prolonged period of courtship.⁷³ Although a long-standing client could expect to receive sexual gratification from his relationship with an elite courtesan, the dearth of sensual passages

⁶⁹ Han Bangqing, p.123.

⁷⁰ Han Bangqing, p.38.

⁷¹ Han Bangqing, p.10.

⁷² Han Bangqing, p.232.

⁷³ Hung, p.540.

and the overwhelming focus on the courtesans' social functions suggest that the primary role of a first-class courtesan was to serve as a professional entertainer. The first-class courtesans of Han Bangqing's novel largely spend their nights entertaining clients at parties and social gatherings as well as supplying them with song and music. They strove to maintain a dignified and respectable reputation in order to further strengthen their appeal and preserve their superior image as cultural entertainers, instead of mere sexual commodities.

The difference between first-class and second-class courtesans, as portrayed by Han Bangqing, already illustrates the disparity between the various types of Shanghai prostitutes, although the first-class and second-class courtesans are still well above the streetwalker. This occurs in the novel when Clever Gem, a first-class courtesan, travels with Cloudlet to visit her sister, Love Gem, who works in a second-class house. Cloudlet is immediately astounded at just how brazen the second-class courtesans behave in his presence. As soon as he enters the second-class establishment, he is surrounded by a group of courtesans who eagerly try to solicit his business by "behaving in a flirtatious and provocative manner."⁷⁴ From this scene, the reader can conclude that the forthright and more "blatantly sex-oriented" behavior of the latter type is in marked contrast to the more dignified behavior of the first-class courtesan.⁷⁵ Moreover, Love Gem's deferential and respectful attitude toward her sister, despite the fact that Love Gem is the eldest, further demonstrates the superior status of the first-class courtesan in Shanghai society. The fact that there is such a difference between first-class and second-class courtesans, let

⁷⁴ Han Bangqing, p.89.

⁷⁵ Hung, pp.540-541.

alone between first-class courtesans and “game birds,” indicates just how diversified the world of Shanghai prostitution was during the nineteenth century.

Before proceeding to analyze the ritualized behavior of courtesans and clients, a brief examination of the patron of the Shanghai brothels is necessary. The rapid commercialization of Shanghai following the Opium Wars led to the incipient restructuring of Chinese society in treaty ports like Shanghai. Although the disappearance of the traditional scholar elite and the emergence of the middle class did not occur until the twentieth century, its origins stem from this pivotal period. The social transformation of Shanghai during the late Qing also had a profound effect on the world of prostitution, as the brothels of Shanghai became increasingly commercialized and sexualized, illustrated by the gradual disappearance of the highly educated courtesan and the traditional scholar. The clients that comprise the *Sing-song Girls of Shanghai* reflect this trend, as most of them belong to the landed gentry or merchant class, not the scholar elite.

As Shanghai served as the commercial and entertainment center of China during this era, the majority of the clients in the novel travel to the city in order to take advantage of its manifold amusement and business opportunities. The dearth of clients native to Shanghai is indicative of the diverse population of the city, as the majority of the clients come from disparate parts of the country, such as Shandong and Guangzhou. The existence of regional groups of prostitutes to satisfy Shanghai’s diverse male clientele is further evidence of the heterogeneous nature of Shanghai society. This is exhibited in the novel when a group of men decide to hold a party at a Cantonese banquet hall. As these men are accustomed to the Suzhou style courtesans, who speak in the Wu dialect and are known for their dignified and reserved behavior, they are flabbergasted by

the unfamiliarity of the Cantonese brothel: “The decoration was indeed novel and distinctive, completely different from what they were used to in the Shanghai brothels.” As for the Cantonese prostitutes, their appearance, uncouth behavior, and boisterous singing were so unusual that it “was terrifying” to many of them.⁷⁶ For clients from Guangdong, however, visiting a Cantonese prostitute was a means to satisfy their desire to find a female partner who not only shared their language and lifestyle, but who also made them feel less estranged from their distant hometown.⁷⁷

For many of these men who did not call Shanghai their home, forming a relationship with a high-class Shanghai courtesan was a means to bolster their social prestige and establish their identity in a city full of sojourners. The desire of these men to be associated with an elite courtesan who enjoyed celebrity status is demonstrated in the novel when Prosperity Luo, an affluent official who is in Shanghai on business, switches his patronage from Lute, a courtesan whom he had been seeing for several years, to the illustrious Green Phoenix. In addition to enhancing one’s social status, visiting the high-class Shanghai brothels also offered a customer the rare opportunity to choose his romantic partner, a practice denied to most couples due to the traditional custom of arranged marriage. The deep sentimental attachment of many courtesan/client relationships portrayed in the novel, sometimes even to the extent that they take on a conjugal appearance, attests to the yearning amongst the clients for emotional fulfillment, something absent from their relationships with their formal wives.⁷⁸

As Han Bangqing’s detailed portrayal of the manners of the courtesan houses demonstrates, interaction between the courtesan and her client was highly regulated by

⁷⁶ Han Bangqing, pp. 416-417.

⁷⁷ Henriot, pp. 82-85.

⁷⁸ Henriot, p. 50.

ritual. Through her examination of late Qing Shanghai courtesan handbooks, Catherine Yeh argues that the rituals used in Shanghai during the latter half of the nineteenth century were “different in content and much more elaborate than anything in existence previously.” Situated in the more liberated environment of the foreign settlements, the rituals of the Shanghai brothel “reflected this new environment and reacted to it.”⁷⁹ This is exhibited in the elaborate rituals dealing with Shanghai’s transient clientele and the much more public Shanghai courtesan. The traditional and higher-class brothels were considerably more ritualized than the lower-class brothels - houses that catered to customers who were only interested in sexual gratification.⁸⁰ Living in a society heavily influenced by Confucian notions of ritual, perhaps these rules made it easier for the client and courtesan to develop a relationship in the Shanghai brothel, a setting where traditional moral standards of behavior did not apply. Operating in this novel context, these rituals would have provided a useful framework for which the courtesan and her client could interact.

When a client sought to establish a relationship with an elite courtesan, an introduction was required from a long-standing patron of the house. This ritual practice served as a guarantee that the prospective client was both financially and culturally established. Moreover, in a city full of sojourners, this practice also helped to protect the house from clients who might leave the city before paying off their debts. By incorporating traditional elements, such as the use of a go-between, the courtesan and client would be operating on culturally familiar ground. While the prospective client of the brothel could choose whichever courtesan he was attracted to, a first-class courtesan

⁷⁹ Yeh, “Reinventing Ritual,” pp. 7 & 14.

⁸⁰ Henriot, pp.33-35.

ultimately had the freedom to accept or reject a client's advances, thus further illustrating some of the freedoms elite courtesans enjoyed operating within the foreign settlements of Shanghai.⁸¹

Once a relationship was established between a client and a courtesan, ritual dictated that the client host a dinner party at the courtesan's house. This arrangement not only demonstrated the client's sincere attachment to the courtesan, but also bolstered the courtesan's prestige within the brothel, as the house generated a considerable amount of money from these parties.⁸² The extravagant party Prosperity Luo throws at Green Phoenix's house after obtaining her as his courtesan is an example of this ritual practice. Establishing a relationship with a courtesan, however, was not purely a financial matter, as it also involved participating in a subtle game of seduction where each side sought to gain an advantage over the other.⁸³ The details of the courtesan/customer courtship in the modern setting of Shanghai will be discussed in more depth in the section entitled "The Emergence of the Modern Urban Man and Woman."

While these elaborate rituals were theoretically in place to ensure that both the courtesan and her client would be treated fairly, in reality, however, they served as a means for the courtesan "to control the game." In essence, the rituals of the Shanghai brothel had the effect of enhancing the power of the courtesan over her client and greatly inhibiting the possibility for emotional attachment to develop, as these rituals "dictate[d] appropriate forms for the expression and pursuit of desires."⁸⁴ However, as the following analysis of romantic relationships found in the novel will illustrate, these rituals

⁸¹ Yeh, "Reinventing Ritual," pp.15-17.

⁸² Yeh, "Reinventing Ritual," p.22.

⁸³ Henriot, p.56.

⁸⁴ Yeh, "Reinventing Ritual," p.16.

sometimes failed at protecting the courtesan and her client from becoming so emotionally involved that their relationship exceeded the rules of the brothel.

The Romance of Shanghai Courtesans and Clients

The failure of many couples in the novel to realize their romantic dreams symbolizes the futility of pursuing love in an environment that is not conducive to its development. Situated in the commercialized and highly ritualized Shanghai brothels, strong romantic attachments between courtesans and clients were not supposed to occur. However, as the relationships between Jade Tao and Water Blossom, Modesty Zhu and Twin Jade, and Lotuson Wang and Little Rouge demonstrate, the human desire for emotional attachment can cause romantic love to occur in the most unlikely places.

In Zhang Ailing's Mandarin translation of the novel, she writes that the intense feelings Jade Tao and Water Blossom share for each other is truly remarkable, especially when it is put in the context of occurring within the confines of a brothel.⁸⁵ It does not take long for the reader to come to the same conclusion that Jade Tao and Water Blossom are deeply attached, as onlookers are frequently commenting that they have "never seen such love as theirs; it's indescribable."⁸⁶ Unfortunately, however, Water Blossom suffers from tuberculosis. Similar to *Dream of the Red Chamber's* Lin Daiyu, Han Bangqing describes Water Blossom as weak, sensitive, and fragile due to her debilitating illness. She is frequently depicted as suffering from bouts of insomnia and a decreased appetite, both of which cause her to have a "thin sallow face."⁸⁷ According to the diagnoses of a

⁸⁵ Zhang Ailing, trans. *Haishanghua luo*, p.319.

⁸⁶ Han Bangqing, p.57.

⁸⁷ Han Bangqing, p.159.

renowned traditional Chinese doctor, her deteriorating health is exacerbated by her “overworked” mind, which has “accumulat[ed] worries and sorrows over the years.”⁸⁸

Apart from the filial concern that she has for her widowed mother, who is completely dependent on her, Water Blossom’s “worries” and “sorrows” largely stem from the knowledge that her station in life as a courtesan has made it impossible for her to realize her romantic aspirations. Although Jade Tao and Water Blossom are pursuing love in the more liberated environment for women of the Shanghai settlements, the traditional stigma associated with allowing a courtesan to accede to the status of wife, and the dominant traditional practice of arranged marriage, still hinder their desire to become husband and wife. This illustrates that even in the modern city of Shanghai, the residents still strictly adhered to some traditional customs.

While Water Blossom acknowledges that her “fate is not a happy one,” her romantic attachment to Jade Tao and desire for upward mobility causes her to entertain the impossible dream of becoming the wife of a respectable man. Jade Tao is also not immune to the temptation of imagining that the woman he is passionately devoted to (交好情形) and “deeply in love with” (真正要好得) will one day become his wife.⁸⁹ When she asks him to “keep [her] company for three more years,” he responds by promising her that she will “be the wife [he will] grow old with.”⁹⁰ In an act of selfless devotion to both Jade Tao and her pseudo-sister, River Blossom, Water Blossom tells Jade Tao, “if there’s a place in your heart for me, then promise me this: as soon as I’m dead, you should marry River Blossom; it’ll be just the same as marrying me.”⁹¹ These intimate scenes help to

⁸⁸ Han Bangqing, p.301.

⁸⁹ Han Bangqing, p.294.

⁹⁰ Han Bangqing, p.143.

⁹¹ Han Bangqing, p.163.

highlight the poignant difference between Jade Tao and Water Blossom's relationship and the "normal" courtesan/client relationship of the Shanghai brothels. Their deep affection for each other allows them to enjoy transitory moments of romantic gratification, but it also blinds them to the realization that they are both living a romantic fantasy.

The pureness and sincerity of Jade Tao and Water Blossom's relationship makes it all the more singular when it is compared to others in the novel. Their uncommon romantic relationship is succinctly summarized by an onlooker who remarks, "In the Shanghai brothels, clients and courtesans all cheat on each other; everybody's shameless. Now, these two are truly in love, yet she's got the rotten luck to fall ill" (上海把势里, 客人骗信人, 信人骗客人, 大家不要面孔。刚刚有两个要好了点, 偏偏不争气, 生病了).⁹² The deep sentimental attachment between Jade Tao and Water Blossom is exhibited in their solicitous behavior toward each other. Throughout the novel, Water Blossom is constantly fretting over Jade Tao's welfare, even going so far as to lick his eyeballs in order to cure him of infection. As their relationship is founded on mutual affection, Jade Tao is also prone to excessive fits of worrying over his lover's frail condition. Whenever he is invited to parties or banquets that require him to leave Water Blossom for extended periods of time, he often behaves at these social events in an aloof and indifferent manner, as he is consumed with thoughts of his sick lover. In stark contrast to most of the novel's male characters, Jade Tao's devotion to Water Blossom causes him to drink moderately and refrain from gambling and smoking opium. Their unwavering fidelity is extraordinary, especially considering that they are operating in the

⁹² Han Bangqing, pp.294-295.

highly promiscuous setting of the Shanghai brothel. Unlike many of the courtesans and clients in Han Bangqing's novel, Jade Tao and Water Blossom remain faithful to the end.

The uniqueness of Jade Tao and Water Blossom's romantic relationship, however, also ensures its demise, as this type of deep sentimental attachment is unsuited for the realities of the commercialized and sexualized Shanghai brothel, as well as the world of traditional China. Apart from Water Blossom's serious illness, the couple's chances of living a happy life together are greatly weakened by Jade Tao's "insist[ence] on marrying her as his wife," instead of taking her as his concubine. When Jade Tao's family learns of his marriage proposal, they blatantly reject it "on the grounds that it'd be a disgrace for the family to take a courtesan for a wife."⁹³ The lack of understanding and outright indifference to the deep emotional attachment between Jade Tao and Water Blossom is further exhibited by Cloud Tao, Jade Tao's elder brother. When Cloud Tao learns that Water Blossom's death is imminent, he insensitively remarks that her death will free Jade Tao "from all [his] cares and worries, which might not be a bad thing for him."⁹⁴ Later, when Jade Tao becomes overcome with grief during Water Blossom's funeral, Cloud Tao admonishes him for "overdoing it."⁹⁵ Water Blossom's fatal illness thus has the unintended consequence of sparing the couple from the inevitable separation they would have had to endure as a result of the adamant opposition to their union from Jade Tao's family.

The second romantic relationship portrayed in the novel that exceeded the rules of the brothel is Modesty Zhu and Twin Jade's. Similar to Jade Tao and Water Blossom's relationship, Modesty Zhu and Twin Jade allow themselves to become so emotionally

⁹³ Han Bangqing, p.303.

⁹⁴ Han Bangqing, p.342.

⁹⁵ Han Bangqing, p.357.

involved that they succumb to the illusion that their romantic fantasy could become a reality. Modesty Zhu's naiveté is demonstrated when he falls madly in love with the first courtesan he meets, Twin Jade, and then promises to marry her as his main wife. As Twin Jade is also young and inexperienced, she behaves as an active participant in this relationship by naively aspiring to become Modesty Zhu's main wife. Their relationship gradually becomes more serious as Modesty Zhu becomes enamored with her: "Twin Jade's looks, voice, and her every movement [was] replayed daily in his heart. He wrote poems about her, he dreamed about her, and finally he fell ill pining for her."⁹⁶ As their deep sentimental attachment toward each other suggests, Modesty Zhu and Twin Jade are living a completely separate life from the "normal" brothel life – that is, their relationship is wholly uncorrupted by the promiscuous and commercial realities of the Shanghai brothels. However, as Jade Tao and Water Blossom's romantic experience illustrates, "the more in love" a courtesan and client become, "the worse their trouble!"⁹⁷

When Modesty Zhu learns that his elder brother has arranged for him to be married to a girl from a respectable family, he immediately seeks assistance from the "leader of the love cult," Harmony Qi.⁹⁸ Unbeknownst to Modesty Zhu, however, is that Harmony Qi had earlier advised his elder brother to "see to his marriage," even though they were both fully aware of the deep romantic attachment between Modesty Zhu and Twin Jade.⁹⁹ This so-called expert "with affairs of the heart" demonstrates his traditional views on marriage by telling Modesty Zhu: "If you want to take Twin Jade as your concubine, that's easy enough, but you won't be able to make her your wife." When

⁹⁶ Han Bangqing, p.340.

⁹⁷ Han Bangqing, p.344.

⁹⁸ Han Bangqing, p.440.

⁹⁹ Han Bangqing, p.340.

Modesty Zhu tells Harmony Qi that “Twin Jade is awfully stubborn” and has threatened to kill herself if he takes another wife, Harmony Qi casually brushes aside these concerns by advising him not “to take it seriously” and “guarantee[ing him that] the show will go on.”¹⁰⁰ The traditional view of romance and marriage, typified by the advice of Harmony Qi, does little to assuage Modesty Zhu’s worries and does even less to resolve his romantic predicament. Moreover, the behavior of Amity Zhu, Modesty Zhu’s elder brother, in arranging a marriage for Modesty Zhu without consulting him further exacerbates the delicate situation and ensures the demise of his younger brother’s romantic dream. The conduct of the elder brother in this situation is comparable to Cloud Tao in that they both blatantly fail to take into consideration the emotions of the younger generation.

The disastrous conclusion of Modesty Zhu and Twin Jade’s relationship occurs shortly after Twin Jade finally learns that Modesty Zhu is already engaged. Her adamant insistence on becoming Modesty Zhu’s wife, as he had earlier predicted to Harmony Qi, causes her to arrange for herself and Modesty Zhu to drink raw opium in accord with a previous vow they had made “to be husband and wife and to live and die as one.” When Modesty Zhu refuses to honor his pledge, Twin Jade berates him: “you heartless rascal, you deserve to be chopped up into a thousand pieces! You said we’d die together, so why didn’t you die just now?” This scene demonstrates that the emotional attachment of these two characters has reached such a level that even the possibility of suicide exists, a situation that has clearly exceeded the rules of the “normal” courtesan/client relationship. Twin Jade’s attempt at committing suicide, which Zhang Ailing believes to be nothing more than a ruse, is eventually thwarted by the wise advice and adept maneuverings of

¹⁰⁰ Han Bangqing, p.440.

Twin Pearl and Benevolence Hong.¹⁰¹ Twin Pearl forces Twin Jade to face reality by telling her “you’re young, and there’re things you don’t understand. You shouldn’t listen to the nonsense clients tell you. Even if [Modesty Zhu] is not engaged, would he be able to make you his wife?”¹⁰² In order to conclude this disastrous love affair, Benevolence Hong arranges for Modesty Zhu to pay ten thousand dollars, which he says will be used to pay for Twin Jade’s future wedding and ransom. The final scene with these two former lovers involves Modesty Zhu cowering behind Benevolence Hong while Twin Jade rebukes him for one last time: “ten thousand dollars buys you your life; you got a bargain.”¹⁰³

The final relationship that exceeds the rules of the brothel is the love affair that occurs between Lotuson Wang and Little Rouge. For over two and a half years, Lotuson Wang epitomized the ideal brothel customer – that is, he was a reliable long-term client that provided Little Rouge with a steady source of income. Their relationship, however, takes an ill turn when Lotuson Wang abruptly seeks to end his relationship with Little Rouge by “jumping troughs” (*tiaocao* 跳槽) to another courtesan, Constance. Keith McMahon describes the process of “jumping troughs,” switching from one courtesan to another, as “one of the most sensitive situations in the brothel community.”¹⁰⁴ The sensitive nature of this practice can be seen in the fact that it not only implies a loss of guaranteed income for the courtesan, but it is also a humiliating gesture that can cause a courtesans’ reputation to be severely damaged, particularly for Little Rouge, given that

¹⁰¹ Han Bangqing, pp.515-516.

¹⁰² Han Bangqing, p.516.

¹⁰³ Han Bangqing, p.519.

¹⁰⁴ McMahon, p.106.

Lotuson Wang is “jilt[ing]” her for a second-class courtesan.¹⁰⁵ As Little Rouge is not about to concede the loss of a long-term customer, she employs every means at her disposal in an effort to maintain her monopoly over Lotuson Wang.

When Little Rouge discovers that Constance has become Lotuson Wang’s new favorite courtesan, she lives up to her “spitfire” reputation by pummeling Constance in a public park, thus illustrating the fierce, and sometimes lethal, competitiveness of the courtesan business.¹⁰⁶ In addition to using physical force, Little Rouge also adeptly employs emotional power to cause Lotuson Wang to submit to her demands. She does this by using the threat of suicide as well as other ingenious means to solicit sympathy from Lotuson Wang. An example of this is when she bemoans her unlucky fate by telling him, “with not a client left and loaded with debts, I’m left stranded.” It is at moments like this that Benevolence Hong, acting as the voice of reason, steps in to point out the unreasonableness of the situation. This is exhibited in the novel when he reminds Little Rouge that “a courtesan doesn’t depend on just one client, nor does a client see just one courtesan...there shouldn’t be so many complications.”¹⁰⁷ While Benevolence Hong’s argument convinces Little Rouge to accept the reality of her unfavorable situation, her remarkable ability (*benshi* 本事) is demonstrated through her uncanny skill at maintaining control over Lotuson Wang, even after his relationship with Constance becomes more serious.¹⁰⁸ Furthermore, Lotuson Wang’s deep attachment to Little Rouge and inability to sever all ties with her precipitates his eventual failure to achieve romantic fulfillment with Constance.

¹⁰⁵ Han Bangqing, p.31.

¹⁰⁶ Han Bangqing, p.29.

¹⁰⁷ Han Bangqing, p.81.

¹⁰⁸ McMahan, p.106.

Little Rouge's downfall, however, is ultimately attributed to her romantic entanglement with an actor, Little Willow. As courtesans were frequent patrons of the theatre, it was not uncommon for them to become romantically involved with an actor, especially considering that they had similar affinities (a love of acting and music) and were both members of the lower rungs of society.¹⁰⁹ However, Little Rouge makes the fatal mistake of further compromising her relationship with Lotuson Wang, an affluent and reliable customer, by falling madly in love with Little Willow, who is not a paying customer. Her mistake is compounded by her ineptness at concealing this affair from Lotuson Wang. Green Phoenix, who epitomizes the successful prostitute, shrewdly assesses Little Rouge's blunder by telling a client, "plenty of courtesans have relationships with actors, but she's the only one who suffers for it."¹¹⁰ When Lotuson Wang discovers first-hand that Little Rouge is having an affair with Little Willow, he immediately flies into a "towering rage" and proceeds to destroy everything that he can lay his hands on in Little Rouge's room.¹¹¹ Once again, in an attempt to pacify Lotuson Wang, Little Rouge uses the threat of suicide, but this time he is adamant in his decision to sever all ties with her, as he promptly pays his account and decides to take Constance as his concubine, much to the chagrin of Little Rouge.

Similar to the conclusion of the two previous romantic relationships analyzed above, both Lotuson Wang and Little Rouge suffer the consequences of pursuing romantic love in an environment that is harmful to its development. Although Little Rouge acknowledges that "taking up with an actor would mean the end of [her] business," her emotional involvement with Little Willow has reached such fervor that she is unable

¹⁰⁹ Henriot, p.58.

¹¹⁰ Han Bangqing, p.460.

¹¹¹ Han Bangqing, p.274.

to take the necessary steps of ending her relationship with him.¹¹² The final description of Little Rouge that Han Bangqing leaves the reader with poignantly illustrates her decline: “[she] had a sallow complexion of an opium addict and was visibly thinner.”¹¹³ Lotuson Wang also suffers from his romantic entanglements in the brothels of Shanghai, as he eventually discovers that Constance has been carrying on an illicit relationship with his nephew. Thus, when he departs Shanghai to take up a post in another province, he leaves a completely defeated man, conquered by two Shanghai prostitutes.¹¹⁴ This disastrous conclusion to Lotuson Wang and Little Rouge’s love affair highlights the futility of pursuing love in the promiscuous and commercialized setting of the Shanghai brothel, and the dangers of allowing love to interfere with one’s business judgment.

Contrasting the novel’s emotionally involved relationships with the more “standard” courtesan/client relationship will be beneficial for gaining a richer understanding of just how far the former relationships exceeded the rules of the brothel. As mentioned earlier, Benevolence Hong and Twin Pearl’s relationship is perhaps one of the most stable relationships to be found in the novel. The stability and success of their relationship can be attributed to their sound judgment and pragmatism, as they are both under no illusion that the romantic fantasy enacted in the foreign settlements of Shanghai could ever become a reality in traditional Chinese society. They never allow themselves to entertain fanciful romantic notions, which indicate that the so-called realistic relationships of Han Bangqing’s novel are largely devoid of romantic sentiment.

¹¹² Han Bangqing, p.281.

¹¹³ Han Bangqing, p.461.

¹¹⁴ McMahan, p.110.

Operating in the commercialized environment of the foreign settlements, they both understand that “doing business” takes precedence over the pursuit of love.¹¹⁵

Another example of a realistic courtesan/client relationship in the novel is the relationship that occurs between Green Phoenix and Vigor Qian. In stark contrast to Modesty Zhu and Twin Jade’s relationship, their relationship is founded on honesty and a mutual understanding that a courtesan/client relationship is ultimately a business transaction. Green Phoenix’s astute understanding of the courtesan business keeps her grounded in reality and does not allow her to become so emotionally involved with Vigor Qian that she forgoes “doing business.” Unlike Little Rouge, Green Phoenix demonstrates her business prowess through her adept ability to maintain a secret love affair with Vigor Qian while also accumulating enough wealth to buy herself out of servitude. Although Vigor Qian is her lover, he remains a paying customer to the end.

In conclusion, based on Han Bangqing’s portrayal of romantic relationships, a realistic bond could develop between courtesans and clients, but only if they both realized that business always took precedence over romantic fulfillment, and a courtesan could never accede to the status of wife - two very unromantic notions. The failure of many of the novel’s characters to realize their romantic aspirations exemplifies the futility of pursuing love in the ritualized and unscrupulous setting of the Shanghai brothel. Although Han Bangqing’s characters are interacting in the more liberated area of the Shanghai settlements, entrenched traditional practices and social stigmas still inhibit the individual’s pursuit of love.

¹¹⁵ McMahan, p.105.

The Emergence of the Modern Urban Man and Woman

Through an analysis of the behavior of the courtesans and clients in Han Bangqing's *Sing-song Girls of Shanghai*, the emergence of the modern Chinese urbanite becomes apparent. The space in which the courtesans and clients interact in the novel – that is, the foreign settlements of Shanghai - played a fundamental role in the construction of the modern urbanite. Situated in the Westernized areas of the city, the Shanghai courtesans and clients were at the forefront in articulating a new modern urban culture, as their dress, behavior, and spending habits prefigured those of the twentieth century Shanghai resident. In so doing, they inadvertently became the trendsetters of urban modernity.¹¹⁶ As Catherine Yeh argues, “the courtesans pioneered the emulation of Western women with their freer public manners, and gradually made these into a part of the fashionable behavior of Chinese women of style.”¹¹⁷ Of equal importance to the creation of the modern urban man and woman in Chinese society was the transitional period in which they lived – the late Qing. Living during this period, which is characterized by paradigmatic social and political change, as China was catapulted into the modern world, the characters of the novel are uncontrollably caught between the competing forces of modernism and traditionalism. As the following analysis will indicate, success in this mutable environment required an ability to adapt to the fast-paced lifestyle of Shanghai and a daunting realization that the only person you can truly depend on is yourself.

In the *Sing-song Girls of Shanghai*, the arrival of the modern urban man and woman is most obvious in the manner in which many of the courtesans and clients

¹¹⁶ Yeh, *Shanghai Love*, pp.4, 16, & 342.

¹¹⁷ Yeh, “Reinventing Ritual,” p.49.

engaged in courtship. While establishing a long-term relationship with a courtesan through a subtle game of conquest and seduction was not a modern phenomenon, the couple's adoption of Western practices and pursuit of love in a modern setting does mark a distinct break with pre-modern practices. Prosperity Luo riding in an open carriage with Green Phoenix through the busy streets of Shanghai, Lotuson Wang and Constance socializing in the city's public parks, and Elan Ge and Snow Scent shopping in a foreign department store are all examples of this new modern form of courtship. Operating outside of the traditional family structure, which restricted contact between the sexes and upheld the practice of arranged marriage, Shanghai courtesans and clients enjoyed a considerable amount of control over the direction of their relationships, most notably the freedom to choose one's partner.¹¹⁸ It is this practice of free love in a modern setting - such as department stores, theaters, and coffeehouses - that presages modern urban forms of dating.

While the behavior of many of the courtesans in the novel articulate modern urban sentiments, it is through an examination of the conduct and rhetoric of the elite courtesan that the makings of the modern urban woman are most evident. What I refer to as the elite courtesan are those courtesans who demonstrated practical self-sufficiency and exerted considerable control over their male clientele. Han Bangqing uses the character of Green Phoenix to epitomize the elite courtesan of 1890s Shanghai. In contrast to Water Blossom and Twin Jade, she is immune to the dangerous temptation of indulging in a love fantasy that would harm her business. Instead, she is determined to buy herself out of prostitution and gain her freedom. Moreover, as a courtesan operating in the unscrupulous environment of the Shanghai brothels, she astutely realizes that the

¹¹⁸ Henriot, p.56.

only person she can truly depend on is herself. In contrast to the traditional woman of pre-modern China, who is often characterized by her docility and dependence on men, Green Phoenix's independent behavior embodies a central component of the modern urban woman – a strong desire for economic independence.

Green Phoenix's status as an elite Shanghai courtesan is in large part based on her reputation as an ingenious woman who once used the threat of suicide to establish control over her madam. As a result, onlookers frequently marvel at her abilities and praise her as "a rare one indeed!"¹¹⁹ In order to secure a steady source of income, she adeptly manages to attach herself to a wealthy official, Prosperity Luo, who promises her that she will be his "only girl."¹²⁰ While Prosperity Luo remains loyal to Green Phoenix throughout the novel, she secretly carries on a relationship with a lover, Vigor Qian. When Prosperity Luo complains about what he sees as a double standard in most courtesans – that is, their tendency to carry on with multiple clients while they expect their clients to remain faithful to just them - she tells him, "we're in this business so we can't help it. If you're willing to secure my business for a whole year, all three seasons of it, then I'll drop all other clients."¹²¹ This scene illustrates her keen understanding of the commercial reality of the courtesan/client relationship and her role within it as a businesswoman. Her ability to maintain a separation between her public role as a businesswoman and her private life as a lover marks the emergence of these "new and modern urban roles."¹²²

The elite courtesan's business savvy and self-sufficiency is exemplified in the novel through the process of Green Phoenix buying herself out of prostitution. In order to

¹¹⁹ Han Bangqing, p.60.

¹²⁰ Han Bangqing, p.53.

¹²¹ Han Bangqing, p.74.

¹²² Yeh, "Reinventing Ritual," p.26.

amass enough money to pay her ransom, she uses her celebrated reputation and emotional power to convince Prosperity Luo to “jump troughs” from Lute to herself.¹²³ After she establishes complete control over this affluent and reliable client, she proceeds to use her emotional power to gradually swindle him out of his money. Her independent spirit and intuitive business sense is exhibited when she tells Prosperity Luo that “as a courtesan, one has to work things out for oneself if one wants to do well.”¹²⁴ She understands the realities of the courtesan business and knows that if she is to amass enough money to buy her freedom, it is going to be solely because of her own efforts. When Prosperity Luo offers to help her out, she bluntly rebuffs him by saying, “who wants you to help out? I have my own plans for buying back my freedom.”¹²⁵ Her business acumen is further displayed when she meticulously reviews the terms of her ransom papers and then proceeds to sever all ties with her madam. As she has worked so hard to obtain this moment of liberation, she is not willing to jeopardize it by entering into a marriage contract where she would be subservient to the husband’s main wife and his other concubines. Instead, she decides to open her own brothel where her independence is guaranteed.

Snow Scent is an example of another elite courtesan in the novel who demonstrates mastery over her male client, Elan Ge. Similar to Green Phoenix, Snow Scent exhibits her superiority in her adept use of emotional power, in this case her temper, to exert control over her client. She displays her emotional prowess by manipulating Elan Ge into promising her that he must always seek her permission before he goes anywhere, something that even his wife is incapable of doing. When Elan Ge realizes that “he [is]

¹²³ McMahan, p.106.

¹²⁴ Han Bangqing, p.393.

¹²⁵ Han Bangqing, p.366.

no match for her,” he acquiesces to her demands by telling her “even my wife never says anything about my comings and goings, and now you want to control me!” Elan Ge’s defeat at the hands of this capable courtesan is demonstrated when she tells him “you’re my son.”¹²⁶ When Elan Ge attempts to depart Snow Scent’s residency, he is astonished to learn that she is unrelenting in demonstrating her mastery over him by insisting on accompanying him on a shopping excursion. Thus, what Elan Ge mistakenly mistook for being “playful subservience” is actually transformed into “real subservience.”¹²⁷ His subservience to her is complete when they leave her residence together and Snow Scent reminds him, “I’m your real mother, don’t you know?”¹²⁸ Her behavior is indicative of the modern urban woman’s desire and ability to play a much larger role in her romantic relationships. In essence, the new woman is empowered by being situated in the liberated environment of the foreign settlements and is no longer content to assume a subservient position to her male partner.

The inevitable confrontation between the traditional Chinese woman from a respectable family and the elite courtesan occurs in Han Bangqing’s novel when Mrs. Yao, an “old fashioned...wealthy housewife,” meets her match in the likes of a truly formidable courtesan, Sunset Wei. Acting with a strong sense of righteous moral conviction, Mrs. Yao angrily storms into Sunset Wei’s place of business and accuses her of “cast[ing] a spell” on her husband, Mallow Yao.¹²⁹ As an elite and formidable courtesan operating in the commercialized environment of the foreign settlements, Sunset Wei is not at all intimidated by this affluent traditional housewife. Her formidableness is

¹²⁶ Han Bangqing, p.43.

¹²⁷ McMahan, p.107.

¹²⁸ Han Bangqing, p.44.

¹²⁹ Han Bangqing, pp.186-187.

exhibited in her ability to rebuff Mrs. Yao's accusations by first admonishing her for lacking the ability (*benshi* 本事) to control her husband, and then forcing her to face the reality of the situation.¹³⁰ Sunset Wei bluntly tells her, "we're a house open for business; anybody who walks in is a client. What do we care whose husband he is?" She goes on to remind Mrs. Yao that Mallow Yao "may be your husband at home, but when he's here, he's our client." At this humiliating rebuke, Mrs. Yao's proud and austere demeanor is instantly reduced to mortification, as Sunset Wei's barbed attack causes her to "flush crimson to her ears and almost burst into tears of desperation," thus illustrating the defeat of the traditional Chinese woman, epitomized by Mrs. Yao, at the hands of the trendsetting Shanghai courtesan.¹³¹ Sunset Wei's behavior indicates that the foreign concessions of Shanghai have created a new woman who is under far less obligation to adhere to traditional standards of behavior.

In contrast to the elite courtesans in the novel, many of the male characters are strikingly unremarkable. The elite courtesans' male clients, typified by Elan Ge, Lotuson Wang, Mallow Yao, and Prosperity Luo, offer an interesting case study into the shifting gender relations and the crisis of masculinity in late Qing Shanghai. As affluent customers of the brothel, these men should have enjoyed special privileges that would have allowed them to dictate the terms of their relationship with their courtesans. Instead, these men, who represent the upper tier of Chinese society, find themselves utterly powerless in the hands of the elite Shanghai courtesan. The emotional power of these elite courtesans, as described earlier, and their exceptional ability to adapt to the mutable environment of the foreign settlements enabled them to gain a decided advantage over

¹³⁰ McMahan, p.108.

¹³¹ Han Bangin, pp.187-188.

their outmoded male clients. Thus, the reader encounters Mallow Yao, a client who fears both his wife and his courtesan; Lotuson Wang, a client who is defeated by two courtesans; Elan Ge, a client who behaves in a subservient manner to his courtesan; and, Prosperity Luo, a client who is fleeced by his courtesan.

The mediocrity of these male characters, particularly in relation to their female partners, not only signifies a fundamental restructuring of gender relations, in which women play a much more influential role, but also suggest a crisis of masculinity. As the characters of Han Bangqing's novel are living during a period characterized by monumental political and social change, they are thus forced to come to terms with an unfamiliar world where traditional and modern standards of behavior are juxtaposed. Operating in this precarious environment, the behavior of many male characters reveals a deep sense of uncertainty, estrangement, and even resignation. The difficulties these men face in attempting to navigate and adapt to the international metropolis of Shanghai is emblematic of the larger dilemma confronting the urban male of the late Qing – that is, what is his proper role in the modern world? The inability of many of the novel's male characters to adapt and thrive in the modern setting of Shanghai is perhaps also indicative of a larger crisis confronting the nation. The absence of a male hero in the novel and the abundance of many weak and outmoded male characters not only signify a crisis of manhood, but also more importantly a national crisis of leadership.¹³²

The character of Benevolence Hong, however, offers an interesting contrast to the novel's weak and largely unsuccessful male characters. He is representative of a moderately successful urban male who is able to adapt and prosper in the modern city of Shanghai. As a proprietor of a shop that sells traditional herbs in the Chinese

¹³² McMahan, pp.92-93.

administered area of the city, his success is largely attributed to his remarkable ability to acclimate to the modern world as soon as he crosses over “Lu Stone Bridge” into the foreign settlements. His role in the novel is akin to a middleman, or a go-between, as he is constantly on the move, resolving conflicts and assisting in numerous business transactions. In essence, as Keith McMahon describes him, Benevolence Hong functions as a “brothel facilitator” – someone who oversees the social affairs of the brothel. His goal as a “brothel facilitator” is to make sure that the courtesans and clients remain grounded in reality by protecting them from getting lost in their romantic illusions. He understands the true nature of the brothels – that is, that the courtesan/client relationship is nothing more than a business transaction.¹³³ When brothel affairs threaten to get out of hand, he functions as a voice of reason reminding those involved that “there shouldn’t be so many complications.”¹³⁴ This is exhibited in the novel when Little Rouge uses the threat of suicide in an attempt to convince her former client, Lotuson Wang, to fulfill his promise of paying off her debts. When Lotuson Wang appears to be adamant in his refusal, Benevolence Hong reminds him of the severity of the situation by telling him, “Little Rouge has no other client but yourself, if you stop going, she’ll be at a loss.” He reminds Lotuson Wang that after all, as patrons of the brothels, “we come out to look for fun, not bad karma, so why push it?”¹³⁵ In contrast to many of the novel’s male characters who sought to establish a relationship with an elite courtesan as a means of self-identification, Benevolence Hong understands that the modern urban male’s identity is not based on the prestige he might gain from associating with an elite courtesan. Instead, success in the modern world is a result of being versed in the workings of the modern city

¹³³ McMahon, pp.107-113.

¹³⁴ Han Bangqing, p.81.

¹³⁵ Han Bangqing, pp.277-278.

and, above all, a person's own efforts to do good for themselves. He is able to thrive in this new environment because he does not allow himself to become nostalgic over the passing of the traditional order. He astutely realizes that the traditional world of pre-modern China is obsolete, and success in the modern world is ultimately contingent upon one's ability to adjust to the fast-paced lifestyle and capricious environment of the modern city.¹³⁶

From an analysis of how Han Bangqing portrays the elite courtesan and patron of the Shanghai brothels, we can start to see the beginnings of the modern urban man and woman. As the example of Green Phoenix, Snow Scent, and Sunset Wei demonstrate, this "new woman" is confident, self-sufficient, and plays a much larger role in her romantic relationships. In other words, this new and modern urban woman behaves in stark contrast to her traditional predecessor who was often defined by her subservience and reliance on males. The "new woman," as depicted in the novel, is not only a savvy businesswoman that possesses a remarkable ability and resolve to accomplish her objectives, but is also someone who enjoys exercising her newfound freedom to pursue free love in the setting of the modern city. While these courtesans are by no means sterling moral examples, their ability to thrive in their less than honorable roles marks them as truly remarkable women.

The modern urban man, on the other hand, is anything but remarkable. He is neither the savior of a weakening China, nor an accomplished romantic lover. Instead, as the characters of Mallow Yao and Lotus Wang indicate, he finds himself struggling to come to terms with a rapidly changing world characterized by shifting gender relations and a disappearance of the traditional moral framework. Those that succeed in this

¹³⁶ McMahon, pp. 5 & 103.

unforgiving and mutable environment are able to adapt to the modern world and avoid the pitfall of bemoaning the passing of traditional customs. The successful modern urban man, typified by Benevolence Hong, is a self-made man who is versed in the workings of the modern city and does not fall prey to romantic illusions; he is a pragmatic businessman, not a romantic scholar.

Conclusion

“It seems to me the more one is in love, the less it lasts. It’s those who behave the way they are that go on year after year, staying together.”¹³⁷ This statement, made by an experienced patron, is a pithy assessment of how romantic relationships are portrayed in the *Sing-song Girls of Shanghai*. As the experiences of Jade Tao and Water Blossom, Modesty Zhu and Twin Jade, and Lotuson Wang and Little Rouge demonstrate, “the more in love they are, the worse their trouble!”¹³⁸ The emotional attachment of these couples blinded them to the realities of the courtesan/client relationship and the traditional restrictions, which still influenced Shanghai society during the late Qing, that forbid a courtesan from becoming the main wife of a respectable man. Moreover, the elaborate rituals of the Shanghai brothel, which were meant to shield the courtesan and client from becoming emotionally entangled, failed to keep the relationships of these couples from exceeding the rules of the brothel. Therefore, Han Bangqing’s portrayal of romantic relationships illustrates the insatiable human desire for romantic fulfillment and the futility of pursuing romantic love in the commercialized and ritualized setting of the Shanghai brothel. As the relationship between Benevolence Hong and Twin Pearl

¹³⁷ Han Bangqing, pp.57-58.

¹³⁸ Han Bangqing, p.344.

suggests, a realistic bond could develop in this type of environment but only if it is rooted in pragmatism and devoid of fanciful romantic ideas.

While many of the courtesans in Han Bangqing's novel fail to realize their romantic dreams, their interaction with their clients reveals a considerable relaxation of the traditional gender boundaries. Living in the foreign settlements of Shanghai, which provided civic order, legal protection, and freedom from the restrictions of traditional Chinese society, these women enjoyed unprecedented freedoms. As exhibited in the characters of Green Phoenix, Snow Scent, and Sunset Wei, the elite courtesans of the *Sing-song Girls of Shanghai* are categorically different from the traditional women of pre-modern China. Their relative self-sufficiency, business acumen, and remarkable ability to adapt to a rapidly changing world paved the way for the emergence of the modern urban woman.

CHAPTER 2:

The Romance of the Modern Urbanite in Zhang Ailing's Writing

Zhang Ailing (1920-1995) established herself in Shanghai during the early 1940s by providing an alternative view on romance and filling the literary void created by the Japanese occupation of the city.¹³⁹ Living in a period of unprecedented change and tumult, her obsession with describing the romantic and the everyday was a way for her to create a sense of normalcy and stability; it served as an outlet of escape from a world that appeared to be on the brink of ruin and collapse. Moreover, her decision to write about the mundane details of urban life instead of writing revolutionary and resistance literature demonstrates her nonpolitical and individualistic focus.

In her essay, "Writing of One's Own," she acknowledges that her writing is mainly concerned with the "trivial things that happen between men and women" because these "placid and static aspects of life have eternal significance."¹⁴⁰ Most of the works found in her short story collection *Chuanqi* (1944), which is often translated as *Romances*, exhibit her unconventional view on romance.¹⁴¹ It is through an analysis of three works found in this collection – "Sealed Off," "Red Rose, White Rose," and "Love in a Fallen City" – that this chapter seeks to gain a richer understanding of her writings. Through an examination of these three representative pieces, this chapter seeks to answer two central questions: how are romantic relationships portrayed in "Sealed Off," "Red Rose, White Rose," and "Love in a Fallen City?" And what does this say about how Zhang Ailing views the modern urban man and woman of the 1940s?

¹³⁹ Dooling, Amy, *Women's Literary Feminism in Twentieth-Century China* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005). pp.138-39.

¹⁴⁰ Zhang Ailing, *Written On Water*, pp.16-18.

¹⁴¹ Kingsbury, p.xii.

An analysis of these three short stories provides an interesting insight into Zhang Ailing's so-called "anti-romantic" views.¹⁴² The romantic hopes and dreams of the characters in the first two stories - "Sealed Off" and "Red Rose, White Rose" - are revealed as nothing more than a fantasy, reflecting Zhang Ailing's "desolate" outlook on the state of human relationships. The characters' moments of genuine pleasure and romance, whether Lu Zongzhen and Wu Cuiyuan, or Tong Zhenbao and Wang Jiaorui, are transitory and possess a dream-like quality. Furthermore, these moments of genuine affection are eventually superseded with insipid everyday experiences, thus demonstrating Zhang Ailing's deep-seated cynicism toward romance. "Love in a Fallen City," however, offers an interesting contrast to "Sealed Off" and "Red Rose, White Rose." While Zhang Ailing's characteristic views on romance are still discernible in this novella, the conclusion of "Love in a Fallen City" differs significantly, as the male and female protagonists are allowed to achieve a semblance of emotional fulfillment. It should be pointed out, however, that their emotional fulfillment occurs only because of catastrophic social upheaval – the fall of Hong Kong to the Japanese. In other words, romantic love can only be realized in Zhang Ailing's world when our everyday existence is interrupted by a calamitous event, such as war.

While Zhang Ailing's unconventional romantic position defines her works, of equal importance to the setting is the influence of modernity, which was most pronounced in Shanghai during this period. The importation of Western ideas and practices led to a fundamental restructuring of Chinese society that forever altered the traditional order, which had provided a framework for the nation and its people for well

¹⁴² Gunn, Edward, *Unwelcome Muse: Chinese Literature in Shanghai and Peking 1937-1945* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), p.198.

over two thousand years. The modern urban Shanghai man and woman are forced to navigate this novel and precarious environment where the competing forces of traditionalism and modernism are both present. Thus, as in “Sealed Off,” “Red Rose, White Rose,” and “Love in a Fallen City,” the behavior of the characters often reveal a sense of uncertainty, trepidation, alienation, resignation, and an instinct to resort to traditional practices when the road becomes fraught with difficulty. Zhang Ailing’s modern urban middle class man and woman, as depicted in these three stories, perform on this new stage, and their failure to realize their romantic aspirations symbolize the despondency and emptiness of everyday existence in 1940s Shanghai.

Late Republican-Period Shanghai

Before proceeding to analyze these three works, a brief description of Shanghai in the late Republican-era is necessary, particularly since the city had a profound effect on Zhang Ailing’s writing and figures prominently in the three stories analyzed in this chapter. Following the collapse of the Qing government in 1911, and with it the discredited two-thousand-year-old imperial system, China was ushered into an era characterized by nearly four decades of tumult and instability. Various experiments with new forms of government aimed at transforming China into a modern nation state were met with failure, leading to political insecurity and violent power struggles. China’s precarious situation during this period was further exacerbated by an increasingly belligerent Japan.¹⁴³ Although the foreign concessions of Shanghai were somewhat insulated from the massive political chaos and warfare of this era, earning it the distinction as a “lone islet” (*gudao* 孤島), the Japanese finally occupied the city in 1941

¹⁴³ Spence, pp.271-273.

and ended the century old concession system. The Japanese occupation of the city was immediately followed by sweeping censorship of the press and a curtailing of political activities.¹⁴⁴ It is in this context that Zhang Ailing wrote her most celebrated pieces, which include the three works this chapter will analyze. Thus, similar to Han Bangqing's Shanghai, Zhang Ailing wrote during a period characterized by monumental social and political change.

As the previous chapter on the *Sing-song Girls of Shanghai* indicated, by the late Qing, Shanghai had become the paradigm of Chinese modernity. As a highly diversified and cosmopolitan city, Shanghai offered a striking contrast between the modern world and the more traditional agrarian China. The juxtaposition of the traditional with the modern, which was a distinguishing feature of Shanghai's public space, created a truly unique environment that could be both disconcerting and enchanting. For many of the city's visitors, whether it was in the late Qing or the Republican-era, Shanghai was thus highly paradoxical. On the one hand, it was seen as a decadent and evil city that constantly served as a reminder of China's humiliation at the hands of Western imperialists. On the other hand, however, the foreign settlements of the city offered its occupants greater freedom and opportunity, as women enjoyed unprecedented access to the public space. Moreover, success in this modern city did not solely hinge upon a person's social status or family connections.

The effect of the strangeness of the city on its occupants is not lost on Zhang Ailing's characters, as they are often depicted at critical junctures in their lives where they are forced to confront the twin forces of modernism and traditionalism. In many of her works, Western curios, such as mirrors and clocks, are frequently juxtaposed with

¹⁴⁴ Wen Hsin-yeh, pp.155-159.

traditional Chinese objects. Leo Lee argues that Zhang Ailing uses a mixture of traditional and modern objects to “punctuate the special poignant moments in the lives of her transitional characters” – moments in which the characters can either embrace the new world and all of its uncertainty, or retreat into their memories of the past.¹⁴⁵ This is exhibited in “Love in a Fallen City” when the female protagonist, Bai Liusu, boldly decides to take control of her future and escape from the clutches of her traditionally hidebound family. As a *huqin* plays in the background, Bai Liusu is described as suddenly “smil[ing] – a private, malevolent smile; the music came to a discordant halt. The *huqin* went on playing outside, but it was telling tales of fealty and filial piety, chastity and righteousness: distant tales that had nothing to do with her.”¹⁴⁶ Zhang Ailing uses the music of a traditional Chinese instrument, such as a *huqin*, to lend this scene an antiquated feeling. This is eventually shattered by Bai Liusu’s audacious decision to act outside of the socially prescribed role of a traditional Chinese woman by taking an active role in her pursuit of a marriage partner. At this critical juncture in her life, Bai Liusu is not content to remain passive and let events play out. Instead, as a woman embracing the modern world, she possesses a sense of agency and is determined to “wager her future” in order to achieve economic security through marriage.¹⁴⁷

Bai Liusu, however, represents one of the rare characters in Zhang Ailing’s works – that is, someone who is able to strike a balance between the often-contradictory demands of a traditional and modern world. Most of the people in Zhang Ailing’s stories, typified by the characters in “Sealed Off” and “Red Rose, White Rose,” struggle to come to terms with the modern world. The sense of intrusion that these characters must have

¹⁴⁵ Lee, Leo, p.275.

¹⁴⁶ Zhang Ailing, pp. 121-122.

¹⁴⁷ Zhang Ailing, p.130.

felt about the influences of modernity on the traditional lifestyle was beautifully depicted in the image created by Yan Ying, which Zhang Ailing used as the cover for her collection of short stories, *Romances* (Figure 1).¹⁴⁸ Modernity, as represented by the



Figure 1

faceless image of a woman, appears to be infringing on the tranquil traditional lifestyle, represented as two women, one of which is probably a servant, clothed in traditional garb sitting down for a cup of tea and a game of mahjong.¹⁴⁹ The stark contrast between these two images and the incongruousness of the faceless modern woman, demonstrates the ambivalence many must have felt living in Shanghai during this transitional period. Moreover, the choice of using

women in this image, instead of men, serves to further highlight the vast differences between the traditional and modern lifestyles, as the status and behavior of women had changed most drastically in the modern era. The presence of foreigners in Shanghai's international settlements, as well as the full-scale occupation of the city by the Japanese in 1941, compounded the tension by adding a colonial political structure to the administration of the city. This combination of modernism, traditionalism, and a Japanese occupation created a precarious environment for the modern resident of Shanghai. These contrasting, and sometimes contradictory, influences on the city had a profound effect on the characters in Zhang Ailing's stories, and help to explain their feelings of estrangement, ambivalence, and desolation.

¹⁴⁸ Lee, Leo, p.xiv & p. 298.

¹⁴⁹ Lee, Leo, p.288.

The influences of modernity on Shanghai can also be discerned in the consumer culture and fast-paced lifestyle of the city's occupants, both of which figure prominently in Zhang Ailing's writing. For the residents of Shanghai during the Republican-era, it was generally acknowledged that a modern lifestyle was equated with the adoption of Western customs and ideas. Western notions of consumerism and recreation were poignantly exhibited in the city's landscape through the abundance of Western-style department stores, coffeehouses, movie theaters, dance halls, and horse races. To the sophisticated Shanghai consumer, these modern edifices of consumerism were symbols of culture and refinement. Many Shanghai writers, including Zhang Ailing, used these places as background settings in their works.¹⁵⁰ This is illustrated in "Love in a Fallen City," when Bai Liusu cunningly attracts the attention of Fan Liuyuan, the male protagonist, in a dance hall. As the other members of her family pride themselves on their traditional pedigree, Bai Liusu is the only one who knows how to dance, and thus she is able to utilize this "utterly shameless" modern talent to endear herself to the affluent Fan Liuyuan.¹⁵¹ In addition to dancing, movie going was also a popular leisure activity for many of Shanghai's residents. Due to Zhang Ailing's role as a moviegoer and screenplay writer, her stories often possess a cinematic quality. Zhang Ailing creates vivid imagery in "Sealed Off" through the face-to-face encounter between Lu Zongzhen and Wu Cuiyuan, when they stick their heads out of the tram in response to a loud noise. She writes, "at close range anyone's face is somehow different, is tension-charged like a

¹⁵⁰ Lee, Leo, p.xiv & pp. 13-32.

¹⁵¹ Zhang Ailing, p.126.

close-up on the movie screen.”¹⁵² Moreover, in “Red Rose, White Rose” and “Love in a Fallen City,” the main male and female characters are described as visiting movie theaters as part of their romantic experience. These examples demonstrate modernity’s influence on Shanghai culture through Zhang Ailing’s writings.

Finally, Zhang Ailing further exhibits the consumer culture that pervaded Shanghai in the way she interprets romantic encounters. According to Lin Zou, “human relationship[s] in Zhang’s world is essentially commercial, in the sense that it is dominated by interest calculation and exchange.”¹⁵³ Living in a transient and commercialized environment, Zhang Ailing’s stories are notoriously sardonic in their blunt interpretation of romance, described as “anti-romantic” by Edward Gunn. As the following analysis of “Sealed Off,” “Red Rose, White Rose,” and “Love in a Fallen City” will indicate, the urban romantic experience in the modern world is inescapably impacted by the highly commercialized setting of the modern city.

“Sealed Off”

Written in 1943, “Sealed Off” describes a chance romantic encounter between two unremarkable urbanites in the midst of an ongoing war. Similar to the “undulating tracks” that appear at the beginning of the story, the vapid existence of these two characters would have been “never ending” had it not been for the unexpected intrusion of war.¹⁵⁴ When an air raid causes the city to be sealed, everyday life in Shanghai comes to an abrupt halt. Zhang Ailing illustrates her obsession with the “placid and static

¹⁵² Zhang Ailing, “Sealed Off,” trans. Karen Kingsbury, In *The Columbia Anthology of Modern Chinese Literature*, edited by Joseph S. M. Lau and Howard Goldblatt (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), p. 181.

¹⁵³ Lin, p.29.

¹⁵⁴ Zhang Ailing, p.174.

aspects of life” in this piece by her decision to focus on the events taking place inside the tram, as opposed to the Japanese occupation and war taking place on the outside of it. In essence, this story describes the effects of the intrusion of war on everyday urban life.

As the city is sealed off and the tramcar is brought to a halt, the tram’s passengers concern themselves with trivial matters so as to avoid thinking about the ongoing war and their empty existence. We see workers discussing office politics, a middle-aged wife worrying about the cleanliness of her husband’s trousers, a medical student completing his homework, and a few passengers reading newspapers and billboards. The male protagonist, Lu Zongzhen, worries more about satisfying his nagging hunger than the air raid. As for the main female character, Wu Cuiyuan, her concern with grading her students’ papers supersedes any concern she may have for the war and occupation. Similar to the thoughts of the old man sitting across from Lu Zongzhen, the passengers’ actions and behavior are devoid of any larger meaning or significance. From this description of the tramcar’s occupants, we can see how the disruption of war has not fundamentally altered their everyday routine. In essence, the inescapable war, which looms in the background in many of Zhang Ailing’s narratives, has become an integral part of the everyday modern urban experience.¹⁵⁵ Sealed off from the outside world as a result of the temporary air raid, the tramcar does provide an ideal “setting for a romantic fantasy.”¹⁵⁶

Before we begin our analysis of the romantic encounter between Lu Zongzhen and Wu Cuiyuan, a brief description of these two characters is essential, as they give us an insight into how Zhang Ailing views the modern urban man and woman. Wu

¹⁵⁵ Huang, Nicole, “Eileen Chang and Alternative Wartime Narrative,” pp.458-62.

¹⁵⁶ Leo Lee, p.289.

Cuiyuan's appearance is comparable to her everyday life: "banal," "bland," and "lacking definition."¹⁵⁷ Zhang Ailing describes Wu Cuiyuan twice in this piece as being a "good daughter" and a "good student."¹⁵⁸ In many of Zhang Ailing's works, including this story and "Red Rose, White Rose," "good person" (*haoren* 好人) often contrasts with "real person" (*zhenren* 真人). In this sense, a "good person" refers to someone who willingly conforms to society's ethical, moral standard often to the detriment of their own happiness. In "Sealed Off," this is exhibited in Wu Cuiyuan's willingness to work toward satisfying her parent's expectations for her future. Therefore, while she "set[s] a record for women's professional achievement" by becoming an English instructor at a university in her twenties, she remains dissatisfied with her life. Her parent's contradictory wishes that she should not only succeed in her studies, but also "find herself a rich husband" further exacerbates her discontent.¹⁵⁹ Zhang Ailing portrays this as the quintessential dilemma confronting the modern urban woman in 1940s Shanghai: how do you satisfy both modern and traditional demands of womanhood?

In order to embody the conflicts for women living in the modern family, Zhang Ailing describes Wu Cuiyuan's household as encapsulating modernity. She describes it as a "modern, model household, devout and serious." Zhang Ailing displays the culture and refinement of Wu Cuiyuan's family through their penchant for listening to Western classical music. However, the artificiality of this urban modern life becomes blatantly evident when we learn that they "didn't understand what they were listening to, but still they listened."¹⁶⁰ In other words, her family simply performs modernity, it serves as a

¹⁵⁷ Zhang Ailing, p.176.

¹⁵⁸ Zhang Ailing, pp. 176-177.

¹⁵⁹ Zhang Ailing, p.177.

¹⁶⁰ Zhang Ailing, p.177.

vener that they erect to camouflage their empty and desolate existence. Living in this artificial environment torn between traditional and modern demands, Wu Cuiyuan's feelings of discontent and alienation and her repressed desires make her the perfect character to play a part in a dream-like romantic tryst.

Similar to Wu Cuiyuan's banal reality, the male protagonist, Lu Zongzhen, also lives a rather pedestrian existence, as he works as an accountant for a local bank. Although he used to engage in "student activities" as a young adult, he later became a willing partner in an arranged marriage. While Zhang Ailing does not specify what activities or movement he participated in, it can be surmised that this is a veiled attack on the participants of the May Fourth Movement. As the movement was well-known for its advocacy of science and democracy as well as its virulent attacks on the feudal practice of arranged marriages, it is highly ironic that a former participant in this movement would later acquiesce to becoming a partner in an arranged marriage. Lu Zongzhen's participation in an arranged marriage indicates that his family represents the more traditional style family, as opposed to Wu Cuiyuan's modern family. Similar to Wu Cuiyuan, however, he is unhappy with his family life and yearns to find someone who will understand and comfort him. From these descriptions of the Lu and Wu household, the reader can discern Zhang Ailing's critique of both the modern and traditional urban family. This is an example of Zhang Ailing's individualistic style of writing - she does not pretend to offer a solution to China's problems; she simply acts as an observer casting her cynical judgment on all.

The fleeting romantic encounter between Lu Zongzhen and Wu Cuiyuan is made possible due to completely unromantic events: the sealing off of the city in response to an

air raid and Lu Zongzhen's advances on Wu Cuiyuan to avoid having to talk to his "detested" nephew.¹⁶¹ While these two events may seem devoid of any romantic notions, their spontaneity makes the encounter all the more extraordinary, as it seems purely unscripted and, is at times, genuine. Moreover, the sealing off of the city "functions as a device of isolation, creating a specific moment in both time and space," where these two unremarkable individuals can enact a romantic fantasy irrespective of any outside influences.¹⁶² Wu Cuiyuan is ignorant as to the true reason behind Lu Zongzhen's decision to sit next to her and engage her in flirtatious conversation. However, his forthright and unorthodox behavior makes her view him as a "real person" (*zhenren* 真人), as opposed to a "stereotypical respectable businessman."¹⁶³ In contrast to a "good person" (*haoren* 好人), Zhang Ailing's use of the term "real person" (*zhenren* 真人) refers to someone who follows their emotions and desires, often irrespective of societal norms. Wu Cuiyuan's yearning for something tangible in her life, something so refreshingly different from her artificial family life, makes her susceptible to this type of behavior. It would be a mistake, however, to see Wu Cuiyuan as a passive player in this romantic escapade. She demonstrates a willingness to take an active role in this game of seduction by sympathizing with Lu Zongzhen when he confesses that his wife does not understand him. For Wu Cuiyuan, this is a once in a lifetime experience that offers the rare opportunity of liberation from her routine existence, and she willingly invests everything into her performance. Within their performance, genuine moments of romance

¹⁶¹ Zhang Ailing, p.178.

¹⁶² Huang, Nicole, *Women, War, Domesticity: Shanghai Literature and Popular Culture of the 1940s* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2005), p.23.

¹⁶³ Zhang Ailing, p.179.

do transpire, but the transitory nature of these unscripted moments only serve to highlight Zhang Ailing's sardonic view of modern romantic ideals.

Underlining the transitory nature of romance in the story, their romantic encounter takes on a surreal quality and becomes even more serious following their face-to-face exchange. It is at this point in their dream-like encounter, when their ordinary and insignificant lives are interrupted for a brief moment of pleasure, that the narrator informs us “they were in love” (他们恋爱着了).¹⁶⁴ As this is uncharted territory for both of the story's protagonists, Lu Zongzhen instinctively resorts to proposing the traditional practice of concubinage to satisfy their romantic desires. Wu Cuiyuan, as an actress fully invested in her part, is unwilling to let this game of seduction come to a premature end and is on the verge of acquiescing to his demands when the blockade is suddenly lifted. Her willingness to entertain the idea of becoming Lu Zongzhen's concubine, something unthinkable for a modern woman, is a blatant act of rebellion against her “prim and proper family” and her modern upbringing. However, as people begin to get back on the tram and the city returns to normal, the curtain closes on their romantic fantasy and Lu Zongzhen returns to the practical and commercialized world. This is exhibited when he says to her “I don't have much money, and I don't want to ruin your life!” The commercialization of their relationship when economics are brought into the equation causes their romantic dream to come to an abrupt end. In addition, his sudden concern with how other passengers on the tram might judge their illicit relationship inspires him to remind her that they must be circumspect in their dealings as “there are people here.”¹⁶⁵ Lu Zongzhen's concern with conforming to external pressures instead of

¹⁶⁴ Zhang Ailing, p.181.

¹⁶⁵ Zhang Ailing, p.182.

following his internal desires signals his conversion back to being a “good person” (*haoren* 好人), and Wu Cuiyuan’s disenchantment with his conformity. Thus, this spontaneous romantic encounter is brought to an end as quickly as it was first initiated.

Zhang Ailing’s alternative view on romance is further demonstrated in the conclusion of this story. Wu Cuiyuan realizes the irrationality of her romantic dream when she sees that Lu Zongzhen had not gotten off of the tram as she initially believed, but instead had moved to his old seat. It is at this moment that “she [understands] his meaning: everything that had happened while the city was sealed was a non-occurrence. The whole of Shanghai had dozed off, had dreamed an unreasonable dream.”¹⁶⁶ In other words, the repressed desires and longing for escape of the story’s two protagonists could ultimately only be manifested in a fleeting dream-like encounter. This chance encounter brings out the “real person” (*zhenren* 真人) in both of them, however these unscripted moments are fleeting and eventually superseded with the everyday “normal” experience of life.

“Red Rose, White Rose”

Written in 1944, “Red Rose, White Rose” is a story about the moral decline of a middle class urban man, Tong Zhenbao. Unlike Zhang Ailing’s other works, this piece is unique in that it meticulously probes into the psyche of a modern male struggling to come to terms with a society that is in flux and beyond his control. As Kam Louie wrote, “in Zhenbao, Eileen Chang has created a male equivalent of the women in her stories, by portraying a man who is transformed by society from being a self-assured person into a

¹⁶⁶ Zhang Ailing, p.183.

warped individual with psychological problems.”¹⁶⁷ Similar to “Sealed Off,” this piece exhibits some common features of Zhang Ailing’s writing: an alternative view on romance, a critique of both the modern and traditional customs, and a deep-seated cynicism for the future of humanity. The following will explore this work by first analyzing the character of Zhenbao, and then discussing his relationships with the women in his life. This analysis reveals Zhang Ailing’s interpretation of the complexities the modern urbanite faces in the mutable environment of 1940s Shanghai.

Emblematic of the urban male condition in 1940s China, Tong Zhenbao is introduced to the reader as “the ideal modern Chinese man.” This is exhibited in his Western education and his “upper-level position in a well-known foreign textile company.”¹⁶⁸ In contrast to his traditional predecessors, Zhenbao is a self-made man from a humble background who is knowledgeable about the world beyond China and versed in business practices, not classical scholarship. While his background, clothing, and demeanor are the epitome of modernity, his desire to conform to society’s traditional standards of behavior regarding human relationships demonstrates the hybrid nature of the modern urban man in 1940s Shanghai. Zhang Ailing describes him as a “filial” son, a “thoughtful” and “helpful” brother, a “hard-working and devoted” colleague, and a kind and generous man to his friends. Zhang Ailing displays sardonic irony in her pithy assessment of Zhenbao’s life, as “a complete success.” However, his naiveté, which is portrayed as perpetuating his moral decline, is illustrated in his simplistic belief that he

¹⁶⁷ Louie, Kam, “Romancing Returnee Men,” In *Romancing Languages, Cultures and Genres*, edited by Kam Louie (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012), p.26.

¹⁶⁸ Zhang Ailing, “Red Rose, White Rose,” trans. Karen Kingsbury, In *Love in a Fallen City* (New York: New York Review Books, 2007), p.255.

was “the master of his world.”¹⁶⁹ Whether it is the women in his life or the events taking place around him, Zhenbao naively believes that any problem he encounters can be resolved through a logical and thorough examination of the facts surrounding the event.

An analysis of Zhenbao’s first sexual experience is essential, as it reveals the reasons behind his obsessive concern with maintaining control over his life. Zhenbao’s first sexual experience occurs with a Parisian prostitute during a brief visit to continental Europe. As with other sexual experiences depicted in Zhang Ailing’s writing, this experience is given a surreal quality. The incongruous Christmas music playing outside the hotel during his summer visit to Paris is comparable to his sexual experience with the prostitute: “like a dream so mixed-up and meaningless that it was almost funny.”¹⁷⁰ However, this dream does not end well for Zhenbao, as he realizes his powerlessness in his inability to “be her master.” The image of an “ancient warrior” that he sees when he looks at her in the mirror symbolizes his defeat at the hands of a foreign prostitute and leaves him “badly shaken.”¹⁷¹ For Zhenbao, it is bad enough that he has been vanquished by a cheap prostitute, but a foreign prostitute makes the experience all the more demeaning. As a Shanghainese, Zhenbao has certainly witnessed first-hand the forces of Western imperialism most poignantly exhibited in the concessional system established in his hometown. China’s humiliation at the hands of numerous foreign powers and weak standing in the international community only serves to heighten his sense of inferiority and make him extremely sensitive to anything that he perceives as being an affront on himself. Thus, his humiliating sexual experience with a foreign prostitute leaves an

¹⁶⁹ Zhang Ailing, pp. 255-256 & 259.

¹⁷⁰ Zhang Ailing, p.257.

¹⁷¹ Zhang Ailing, p.258.

indelible impression on him and convinces him that he must “create a world that [is] ‘right’” and where he could be the “master.”¹⁷²

Furthermore, Zhenbao’s experience with his first love in England - Rose, who is of mixed British and Chinese ancestry - reveals his calculating and ambitious mindset. Her carefree and absent-minded behavior causes Zhenbao to reconsider their relationship. According to Zhenbao’s meticulously calculating mind, “this kind of woman was common enough in foreign countries, but in China it would never do. Marrying her, then transplanting her to his hometown – that would be a big waste of time and money, not a good deal at all.”¹⁷³ As this passage indicates, relationships in Zhenbao’s life are comparable to a commercial transaction, completely devoid of any romantic notions. Zhang Ailing adds further significance to his experience with Rose when he demonstrates unflappable self-control by not taking advantage of her in a moment of weakness. This experience with Rose is a point of pride for him as it was an example of him being “his own master.”¹⁷⁴ Moreover, when his acquaintances in China hear about his so-called gentlemanly conduct abroad, his reputation in the community is instantly bolstered.

As the beginning of the story and its title indicate, Zhenbao neatly classifies his women into two categories: red roses and white roses. The red rose type of woman is exemplified by Rose and the third significant woman in Zhenbao’s life: Wang Jiaorui. If Zhenbao signifies the modern man in 1940s Shanghai, Wang Jiaorui is the embodiment of the modern woman. As an overseas Chinese from Singapore, she is impulsive, flirtatious, sexy, passionate, and Western-educated. In addition to her “party girl”

¹⁷² Zhang Ailing, p.259.

¹⁷³ Zhang Ailing, p.261.

¹⁷⁴ Zhang Ailing, p.262.

reputation and “free-and-easy ways,” she is also the wife of one of his close friends.¹⁷⁵ For Zhenbao’s brother, Dubao, who was “raised in an old-fashioned family,” Jiaorui’s uninhibited demeanor and modern relationship with her husband is completely foreign to him and frequently causes him to become uncomfortable in their presence.¹⁷⁶ Similar to his previous situation with Rose, Zhenbao finds himself attracted to this unrestrained, wayward woman, but he is also fully aware that this type of woman is dangerous, as she is difficult to control. Zhenbao exhibits the workings of his ever-calculating mind in his assessment of the costs associated with carrying on a romantic relationship with Jiaorui: “if a man had to forge ahead on his own, as Zhenbao did, such a woman would be a major impediment,” as she is liable to cause him a scandal.¹⁷⁷ This thought process demonstrates Zhenbao’s selfish ambition and fastidious concern with maintaining his upright public image. In essence, to maintain his high status and public image, Zhenbao must repress his desire for romantic fulfillment. However, the “logical and thorough” Zhenbao, who demonstrated impeccable self-control earlier in his life with Rose, eventually succumbs to the charms of Jiaorui.¹⁷⁸

It is important to note that as opposed to Zhenbao’s previous flirtations, his female partner, Jiaorui, initiates this romantic relationship. She adeptly uses her charm and nonconformist behavior to tempt Zhenbao and cause him to yield to his already ignited romantic desires. Jiaorui’s skill and experience in their game of seduction is further exhibited in her “all too skillful” performance during their first sexual encounter. Zhang Ailing’s choice of imagery to describe this intimate scene – a “red crescent moon”

¹⁷⁵ Zhang Ailing, pp.263-266.

¹⁷⁶ Zhang Ailing, p.267.

¹⁷⁷ Zhang Ailing, p.269.

¹⁷⁸ Zhang Ailing, p.255.

– not only illustrates Zhenbao and Jiaorui’s heightened state of passion, but also serves to highlight Jiaorui’s identity as a “red” rose.¹⁷⁹ Following this encounter, their relationship becomes more serious as both Zhenbao and Jiaorui come to realize “that they loved each other and should go on loving each other” (他们彼此相爱，而且应当爱下去).¹⁸⁰

Similar to Zhang Ailing’s other works, the romance between Zhenbao and Jiaorui does have its moments of genuine affection and pleasure, but these moments are transitory and eventually replaced with the unromantic reality of living in an environment where true romance cannot be realized, as it has been subjugated by modern ambition.

As a modern urban couple in love, Zhenbao and Jiaorui’s modernity is displayed in their choice of recreational activities: watching a movie at a local theater, touring around the city in a car, and taking strolls along Shanghai’s bustling streets. However, while Zhenbao and Jiaorui represent the modern Shanghai man and woman, in reality, they are two completely different people. According to Zhang Ailing’s use of the terms “good person” (*haoren* 好人) and “real person” (*zhenren* 真人), Jiaorui’s willingness to act in accord with her desires irrespective of outside influences causes her to be classified as a “real person” (*zhenren* 真人). Zhenbao’s moments of authenticity, on the other hand, are fleeting and are eventually replaced with his desire to conform to the standards of society, even when it is to the detriment of his own happiness. This illustrates his designation as a “good person” (*haoren* 好人). As a “self-made man” whose “future he’d prepared for all on his own,” Zhenbao is reluctant to give up the life he so meticulously planned, and his high social standing in the community, to satisfy his romantic

¹⁷⁹ Zhang Ailing, p.276 & 281.

¹⁸⁰ Zhang Ailing, p.290.

impulses.¹⁸¹ Living in an environment where contradictory notions of moral behavior are present, due to the merging of traditional and modern ideas, Zhang Ailing uses Zhenbao's predicament to highlight the dilemma many modern urban males confronted in 1940s Shanghai. Zhenbao's apprehension and confusion causes him to fight "hard to subdue the surging waves of longing" he feels for Jiaorui, as he knows "the world would never forgive him" if he married the wife of one of his friends.¹⁸² Thus, Zhenbao is compelled to make a difficult decision: follow his heart and remain with Jiaorui, which will have a deleterious effect on his public reputation, or conform to the rules of society and sever all ties with the woman that he loves. The failure of this modern urban couple to realize their romantic dreams further demonstrates Zhang Ailing's unromantic views.

In contrast to Jiaorui, the white rose type of woman in Zhenbao's life is exemplified by his wife, Meng Yanli, whom he marries after ending his relationship with Jiaorui. If Jiaorui is the epitome of the modern urban woman, Yanli represents the more traditional style woman of 1940s Shanghai. A comparison between Jiaorui and Yanli would yield the following conclusion: "wildly passionate versus deathly restrained."¹⁸³ In other words, Meng Yanli is the exact opposite of Jiaorui, as she is portrayed as well-mannered, unassuming, conservative, and Chinese-educated. Although Zhenbao is a modern urban man, his relationship with his wife is traditional in the sense that "his mother arranged the introductions" and Yanli behaves as a traditional wife.¹⁸⁴ Her traditional demeanor is exhibited in how "she rarely spoke or raised her head and always walked a little behind him [Zhenbao]." Her inability to adapt to the modern world is

¹⁸¹ Zhang Ailing, p.255 & 257.

¹⁸² Zhang Ailing, p.292.

¹⁸³ Louie, p.29.

¹⁸⁴ Zhang Ailing, p.293.

further illustrated in her “uncomfortable[ness at] exercising her new rights” as a modern woman.¹⁸⁵ By marrying an “authentically Chinese” woman who is compliant, as opposed to the intractable urbane Jiaorui, Zhenbao thus maintains his cosmopolitan advantage and control over his female counterpart.¹⁸⁶

Despite Zhenbao’s sense of security in his relationship with his compliant traditional wife, Zhang Ailing perpetuates his moral decline with the discovery that his wife is having an illicit relationship with a “lowly” tailor.¹⁸⁷ This discovery causes Zhenbao to feel stunned and aggrieved, as he realizes the world he had so painstakingly created is tragically flawed. The “ideal” image of his family and sense of mastery over the world are ultimately revealed to be nothing more than a veneer. This revelation is made all the more trenchant with the realization that he cannot even control his docile, “traditional” wife. Overcome with self-pity and “loathing” for his wife, Zhenbao decides to momentarily live a life of debauchery by engaging in drinking and becoming a regular patron of brothels.¹⁸⁸ However, Zhang Ailing portrays the compelling desire of the modern urban male to conform to society’s ethical, moral standard through the end of Zhenbao’s tale, when he abandons depravity and converts back to behaving as a “good man” in the mistaken belief that he can make “a fresh start.”¹⁸⁹

Zhang Ailing’s negative depiction of Zhenbao, a “Westernized” male, illustrates her sense of despondency toward the ability of these returnee males to solve China’s social problems. Zhenbao’s moral decline “from a filial son, dutiful brother and supportive friend into an irresponsible father, disloyal husband, and dishonest brother and

¹⁸⁵ Zhang Ailing, p.294.

¹⁸⁶ Shen, Shuang, “Betrayal, Impersonation, and Bilingualism,” In *Romancing Languages, Cultures and Genres*, edited by Kam Louie (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012), p.95.

¹⁸⁷ Zhang Ailing, p.306.

¹⁸⁸ Zhang Ailing, p.309.

¹⁸⁹ Zhang Ailing, p.312.

friend” occurs only *after* he returns to China. This suggests that his Western education and experience abroad utterly fail to integrate into what Kam Louie refers to as the “moral vacuum” of Chinese society. Living during Shanghai’s rapid transformation into a modern city, the presence of traditional and modern moral standards of behavior created an environment full of contradictions and devoid of any categorical moral framework. The rampant corruption and social dislocation that characterized the Republican-era eventually envelop Zhenbao and precipitate his moral decline. Although Zhenbao represents “the ideal modern Chinese man,” in the sense that he is Western-educated and knowledgeable about the world beyond China, these modern skills have done little to prepare him for living in a transitional society that is experiencing monumental social and political change.¹⁹⁰ Thus, Zhang Ailing’s critical portrayal of this cosmopolitan Chinese man can be seen as a rebuke of “the high-minded cosmopolitan ideals championed by the May Fourth pioneers.”¹⁹¹ In essence, Zhang Ailing uses the character of Zhenbao to illustrate her blunt assessment that the national modernization movements advocated by many of China’s intellectual elite have done little to resolve the nation’s problems.

In addition to depicting Zhang Ailing’s disenchantment with the idea that the Westernization of China could be a panacea for the country’s social and political problems, through an analysis of Zhenbao’s numerous romantic relationships, it becomes evident that his sense of identity is ultimately created by the women in his life. Living in the capricious environment of 1940s Shanghai, Zhenbao attempts to find his footing in this uncertain world and maintain a semblance of order through his simplistic categorization of women and his perceived mastery over them. The reason Wang Jiaorui

¹⁹⁰ Louie, p.28.

¹⁹¹ Shen, p.95.

and the Parisian prostitute represent such dangerous threats to Zhenbao's system are because they typify the two things he fears the most: a loss of control and a feeling of subjugation. In contrast, Meng Yanli appeals to him mainly because of her complaisant attitude and lack of will, not because he is romantically attracted to her. Zhenbao's heart clearly desires for him to be romantically involved with Jiaorui, but his ambitious and ever-calculating mind deters him from pursuing romantic fulfillment, as he believes "the world would never forgive him" for his involvement with a friend's wife.¹⁹² In the end, Zhenbao allows his romantic attachment to Jiaorui to be subjugated by his worldly ambitions and concern for his public image. Zhang Ailing's portrayal of Zhenbao's quest for an ideal marriage partner is completely devoid of any romantic notions, as he is solely concerned with finding an obedient wife who will not damage his social credentials, not romantic love. Thus, similar to "Sealed Off," the failure of the story's characters to realize their romantic aspirations demonstrates Zhang Ailing's pessimistic view on romance.

"Love in a Fallen City"

"Love in a Fallen City" was written shortly before "Sealed Off" in 1943 and is regarded by many as Zhang Ailing's most celebrated work. Similar to "Sealed Off" and "Red Rose, White Rose," this piece also exhibits Zhang Ailing's anti-romantic views and disenchantment with the notion that the modernization of China could ameliorate the country's myriad problems. However, what marks "Love in a Fallen City" as truly unique is its conclusion in which the male and female protagonists are allowed to realize their romantic dreams, albeit only after the destruction of their civilization. In order to gain a

¹⁹² Zhang Ailing, p.292.

richer understanding of this novella, the following analysis will first look at how Zhang Ailing portrays the story's two main characters, Bai Liusu and Fan Liuyuan, and then explore their romantic involvement, as well as the abrupt intrusion of war on their everyday life.

The female protagonist in the story, Bai Liusu, is similar to many other female characters in Zhang Ailing's writing, in the sense that she is depicted as being trapped in a traditional household that is in a steady state of decline. This is illustrated in the story's opening, when the clocks in the Bai household – that is, those that are not broken - are described as being an hour behind Shanghai's clocks. The stagnant nature of the Bai household offers a striking contrast to the fast-paced, mutable environment of the modern international metropolis of Shanghai. Zhang Ailing writes, "The Bai household was a fairyland where a single day, creeping slowly by, was a thousand years in the outside world. But if you spent a thousand years here, all the days would be the same, each one as flat and dull as the last one."¹⁹³ This traditionally hidebound family is mired in the past and unwilling to embrace the uncertainties of the modern world.

The traditional sentiments of the Bai family can also be seen in their living situation and their old-fashioned ideas concerning marriage. In contrast to the Western inspired nuclear family that was founded on the premise of free love, the Bai household represents the epitome of a traditional style family.¹⁹⁴ In addition to having three generations of the family living under one roof, all of the important decisions are made by either the male members of the family or their mother, due to her advanced age. As the Bai household prides itself on its traditional pedigree by not permitting the female

¹⁹³ Zhang Ailing, pp.120-121.

¹⁹⁴ Wen Hsin-yeh, p.112.

members of the household to “go out and meet people,” the services of a matchmaker are frequently employed to help facilitate the ancient practice of arranged marriage.¹⁹⁵ In keeping with their traditional inclinations, Liusu is largely ostracized by her family and criticized as a “real bad-luck comet” and “a soiled flower” simply because of her status as a divorcee.¹⁹⁶ When Liusu refuses to return to her former husband’s house after his death, Third Brother, who acts as the patriarchal head of the family, demonstrates his traditional views in his denouncement of the law. He tells her, “Don’t try to scare us with the law...The law is one thing today and another tomorrow. What I’m talking about is the law of family relations, and that never changes! As long as you live you belong to his family, and after you die your ghost will belong to them too!”¹⁹⁷ As an archetypal traditional patriarch, Third Brother believes that human relationships and the perpetuation of one’s family line are much more important than any legal proceedings associated with the modern practice of divorce.

Situated in the stifling and antiquated environment of the Bai household, Liusu is ostensibly just another one of Zhang Ailing’s many tragic female characters. According to Kam Louie, the women in Zhang Ailing’s works are often the most tragic characters, simply because they are unable to escape from the sad predicaments of life.¹⁹⁸ This is exhibited in “Sealed Off” and “Red Rose, White Rose,” as the female characters all fail to find happiness and realize their romantic aspirations in the transitional setting of 1940s Shanghai. Liusu, however, diverges from Zhang Ailing’s other female characters in her resilience and determination to not succumb to the tragic fate of other women in similar

¹⁹⁵ Zhang Ailing, p.119.

¹⁹⁶ Zhang Ailing, pp.114 & 127.

¹⁹⁷ Zhang Ailing, p.113.

¹⁹⁸ Louie, p.31.

situations.¹⁹⁹ In her essay “Candid Talk Concerning ‘Love in a Fallen City,’” Zhang Ailing acknowledges the strengths and weaknesses of the story’s female protagonist: “Liusu is indeed an extremely formidable woman, as she is both decisive and eloquent. Her only weakness, however, is her upbringing and lack of educational experience” (流苏实在是一个相当厉害的人，有决断，有口才，柔弱的部分只是她的教养与阅历，my translation).²⁰⁰ Although Liusu is twenty-eight years old, divorced, and not well educated, she is resolved to take the necessary steps to secure her freedom, which will allow her to escape from the clutches of her traditionally dogmatic family. Her decisiveness and bold determination to act irrespective of her family’s wishes marks her as a truly remarkable woman. Situated in the more liberated, modern city of Shanghai, Liusu is thus emboldened to take actions that would have been unimaginable for any female living in pre-modern times. As a woman embracing the modern world, she possesses a sense of agency and is willing to “wager her future” in order to achieve her desired goals.²⁰¹ This moment occurs in the novel just prior to her introduction to the affluent Fan Liuyuan.

Bai Liusu’s only avenue of escape from her traditional family is to obtain economic security through marriage. Zhang Ailing uses this to highlight the modern woman’s predicament and the challenges associated with living in a modern society. While the women of 1940s Shanghai unquestionably enjoyed greater freedoms than their traditional predecessors, living in the modern city also entailed overcoming new challenges, such as the quest for one’s marriage partner. Haiyan Lee suggests that since marriage was the only “vocation open to women” living during this period, they engaged

¹⁹⁹ Dooling, p.166.

²⁰⁰ Zhang Ailing, *Liuyan* (Beijing: Beijing chubanshe jituan, 2009), p.192.

²⁰¹ Zhang Ailing, p.130.

in romantic relationships with the expectation that it would result in marriage, only to find themselves severely disappointed and often victimized.²⁰² For women like Liusu, marriage symbolized economic security and social stability, thus it was the determinant of whether or not they would live a life of happiness or misery. The modern urban man, on the other hand, was generally allowed greater freedom in his relationships with women and was often excused by society for his lack of fidelity, as he is often depicted as engaging in illicit affairs with multiple women or patronizing brothels. This is exhibited in Zhang Ailing's works through the characters of Fan Liuyuan, the male protagonist of "Love in a Fallen City" who will be analyzed in more detail below, and Tong Zhenbao, the main male character in "Red Rose, White Rose." Thus, Haiyan Lee's argument suggests that the influences of modernity have created an undesirable situation for the modern urban woman, as her only means of achieving a respectable livelihood is through marriage, while her male partner is generally permitted to live a life of debauchery.²⁰³ This is another example of Zhang Ailing's disillusionment with the idea that modernity would solve all of China's social problems. Moreover, the fact that Bai Liusu is pursuing the affluent Fan Liuyuan solely for economic security, not for romantic fulfillment, is further evidence of Zhang Ailing's distinctive anti-romantic views.

The reader is first introduced to the story's male protagonist, Fan Liuyuan, through the matchmaker the Bai household hires in order to find a suitable husband for Seventh Sister, one of its younger members. From the matchmaker's account, we learn that he is thirty-two years old and that both of his parents are deceased. His father was a wealthy real estate tycoon who had abandoned his traditional Chinese wife in order to

²⁰²Lee, Haiyan, *Revolution of the Heart: A Genealogy of Love in China, 1900-1950* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), p. 134.

²⁰³ Lee, Haiyan, p.134.

marry an overseas Chinese. Afraid to return to his traditional wife in China, his father decided to settle in England with his new wife, and Liuyuan is the product of their union. Having spent his adolescence growing up in Europe, Liuyuan differs from “Red Rose, White Rose’s” Zhenbao, in the sense that he is a Sinicized Westerner, not a Westernized Chinese.²⁰⁴ Similar to Zhenbao, however, Liuyuan’s moral corruption begins only after he returns to the moral vacuum of China. He explains his moral decline to Liusu after he acknowledges the difficulties she has had to overcome in her life: “You’ve certainly seen more than enough of all these awful people, and awful things that are everywhere around us. But if you were seeing them for the first time, it would be even harder to bear, even harder to get used to. That’s what it’s been like for me. When I arrived in China I was already twenty-four. I had such dreams of my homeland. You can imagine how disappointed I was. I couldn’t bear the shock, and I started slipping downward.”²⁰⁵ This downward slide is exhibited in his playboy reputation and dissolute ways, as he is widely known to have “gambled, gourmandized, [and] visited prostitutes” after his return to China.²⁰⁶ Thus, the challenge for Liusu in attempting to achieve economic security through marriage with this romantically experienced Sinicized Westerner is emblematic of the modern woman’s dilemma: “how to secure one’s life by securing the commitment of a man who excels in the modern mode of love.”²⁰⁷ As the following analysis of their romantic experience will indicate, Liusu understands the challenges confronting her and realizes that her future happiness is solely contingent upon her performance in her romantic involvement with Fan Liuyuan.

²⁰⁴ Louie, p.29.

²⁰⁵ Zhang Ailing, pp.139-140.

²⁰⁶ Zhang Ailing, p.123.

²⁰⁷ Lee, Haiyan, pp.134-135.

In contrast to the other two stories analyzed in this chapter, the setting for their romantic adventure is not Shanghai, but the colonial city of Hong Kong. In Zhang Ailing's writing, Hong Kong is often portrayed as a complement to Shanghai, in the sense that both cities were profoundly affected by the Japanese invasion, and their political and social situations were in utter disarray. For Liuyuan, convincing Liusu to join him in Hong Kong gives him a decided advantage in their romantic game, as he is operating on culturally familiar ground due to the city's "in-betweenness" - an amalgam of British and Chinese influences. Liusu's decision to travel to Hong Kong and pursue Fan Liuyuan in a city that is completely foreign to her is further evidence of her remarkable determination and courage. Moreover, as she is leaving behind her traditional family and all of their Confucian ideas regarding proper female conduct, she is now free to operate outside of their oppressive influences.²⁰⁸ While her arrival in Hong Kong symbolizes liberation from her restrictive traditional family, Liusu is also cognizant of the precariousness of her situation and the dangers that await her in this unforgiving and unfamiliar city. The reader is able to gain a glimpse into her apprehensive state of mind through Zhang Ailing's description of her arrival in Hong Kong. As her ship pulls into the harbor, Liusu is immediately greeted with a "parade of giant billboards along the dock, their reds, oranges, and pinks mirrored in the lush green water. Below the surface of the water, bars and blots of clashing color plunged in murderous confusion. Liusu found herself thinking that in a city of such hyperboles, even a sprained ankle would hurt

²⁰⁸ Li, Jessica Tsui Yan, "From Page to Stage: Cultural 'In-betweenness' in (New) Love in a Fallen City," In *Romancing Languages, Cultures and Genres*, edited by Kam Louie (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012), pp.42-43.

more than it did in other places. Her heart began to pound.”²⁰⁹ This is the setting for the high-stakes game of seduction that occurs between Liuyuan and Liusu.

Zhang Ailing’s detailed description of this couple’s romantic adventure in Hong Kong not only reveals her characteristic unconventional views on romance, but also sheds light on the modern romantic experience. Similar to the romantic experience of Zhenbao and Jiaorui in “Red Rose, White Rose,” Liuyuan and Liusu are depicted as spending their days together visiting movie theaters, restaurants, and dance halls, as well as occasionally sunbathing at the beach outside of their hotel. A brief comparison of their modern romantic experience with the traditional sentiments of the Bai household regarding proper male and female conduct offers an interesting contrast that helps to highlight the vast differences between the two worlds of traditional China and modern China. In contrast to the intimate modern style of dating, typified by Liuyuan and Liusu as well as Zhenbao and Jiaorui, Seventh Sister is accompanied by most of the Bai household on her date with Liuyuan. When he proposes that they first go watch a movie and then proceed to a dance hall, the members of the Bai household are perplexed, as they consider these modern activities to be “quite strange,” and definitely not something befitting for a proper man and woman to engage in. Their old-fashioned ideas and traditional inclinations later cause them to rebuke Liusu for winning the attention of Liuyuan through her “utterly shameless” skill at dancing: “People who are properly brought up, people like us, aren’t taught to dance.”²¹⁰ Although Liusu is raised in a traditional household, her willingness to embrace modern elements enables her to break free from the restrictive and stifling influences of her family.

²⁰⁹ Zhang Ailing, p.131.

²¹⁰ Zhang Ailing, pp.125-126.

In addition to beating out Seventh Sister for Liuyuan's affection, after Liusu arrives in the multicultural city of Hong Kong, she is forced to compete against a formidable foe – an exotic Indian princess. Fortunately for Liusu, however, Liuyuan is attracted to her primarily because he views her as a “real Chinese woman” (真正的中国女人). He tells her, “real Chinese women are the world's most beautiful women. They're never out of fashion.”²¹¹ Although Zhang Ailing's narrative is written from Liusu's perspective, which offers little insight into Liuyuan's thought process, it can be surmised from his culturally diverse background that a so-called real Chinese woman is appealing to him largely because she provides him with a sense of cultural identity. As he has grown up living in the liminal space between European and Chinese culture, marrying a real Chinese woman, typified by Liusu, would define his relationship with his homeland – China. Liusu adeptly utilizes this competitive advantage of hers to behave in a manner that Liuyuan finds alluring – that is, like a “genuine Chinese woman.”²¹² Her performance of Chineseness is frequently exhibited in her “specialty [at] bowing the head” in the presence of Liuyuan.²¹³

Through an analysis of their complex romantic relationship in Hong Kong, it becomes obvious that the quintessential dilemma confronting this couple is how to reconcile their different desires. As mentioned earlier, Liusu desires to marry Liuyuan in order to achieve “financial security,” not romantic love.²¹⁴ Liuyuan, on the other hand, cares deeply about “spiritual love” (精神恋爱) and longs for Liusu “to understand

²¹¹ Zhang Ailing, p.135.

²¹² Dooling, p.168.

²¹³ Zhang Ailing, p.133.

²¹⁴ Zhang Ailing, p.156.

him.”²¹⁵ Perhaps nowhere in the story is their romantic dilemma more evident than in the phone conversation that takes place between them late one night. Through the facilitation of this modern form of technology, Liuyuan, once again, confesses his love to her.²¹⁶ In a clichéd expression of his love, he proceeds to recite a famous poem to her from the *Book of Songs*, which he uses to illustrate his, or perhaps more likely Zhang Ailing’s, fatalistic view of life. Liusu’s reaction to the recitation of this famous classical verse is telling because it is another example of her performance of a real Chinese woman. Playing the part of a traditional Chinese woman who is uneducated in classical learning, she feigns ignorance by telling him “I don’t understand that sort of thing.”²¹⁷ This provides the perfect context for him to assume the role of the traditional male scholar and enlighten his ignorant female partner.²¹⁸ Their romantic conversation becomes tense, however, when Liuyuan bluntly points out the fact that Liusu is not after love, but economic security. He tells her, “I’m not such a fool that I’ll pay to marry someone who has no feelings for me, just so that she can tell me what to do! That’s simply too unfair. And it’s unfair to you, too. Well, maybe you don’t care. Basically, you think that marriage is long-term prostitution.”²¹⁹ While Liuyuan is correct in his assessment of Liusu’s intentions, Jessica Tsui Yan Li points out that Liuyuan completely “disregards the fact that it is in fact the patriarchal system in traditional Chinese culture that restricts her opportunities to achieve economic autonomy.”²²⁰ In characteristic Zhang Ailing style, this flirtation scene concludes with it being equated to a dream-like occurrence. After Liusu hangs up the phone, she is left wondering if the candid conversation that transpired between herself

²¹⁵ Zhang Ailing, pp.140-141.

²¹⁶ Lee, Leo, p.298.

²¹⁷ Zhang Ailing, p.148.

²¹⁸ Louie, pp.20-22.

²¹⁹ Zhang Ailing, p.149.

²²⁰ Li, p.39.

and Liuyuan actually took place: “It was all a dream – the more she thought about it, the more it seemed like a dream.”²²¹

Their game of seduction is finally brought to a conclusion when Liuyuan seduces Liusu and intends on taking her as his mistress, not his wife. While Liusu has attained economic security through her relationship with Liuyuan, her status as his mistress, however, lacks social respectability. Moreover, as Liuyuan plans on leaving for England for an extended period of time, she is left to wonder how she will maintain her sanity in an environment that is completely devoid of meaning. Zhang Ailing’s description of the apartment that Liuyuan rents for her in Hong Kong is indicative of her situation: “Empty rooms, one after another – pure empty space.”²²² If not for the intrusion of war on Liusu’s empty existence, it can be assumed that she would have continued to live as Liuyuan’s mistress in a world devoid of meaning.

In typical Zhang Ailing form, the second part of the novella begins with a brief and nonchalant reference to the war: “On December 8, the bombing started.”²²³ As this passage indicates, war and revolution are not the focus of Zhang Ailing’s narrative. Instead, it is the everyday lives of modern urbanites struggling to come to terms with a transitional society that she takes delight in describing in detail. Similar to “Sealed Off,” the war in “Love in a Fallen City” functions to disrupt everyday life. It creates a space sealed off from the ubiquitous and, at times, oppressive influences of civilization and modern society. More specifically, in the novella, it creates the context for Liuyuan and Liusu to reconcile their differences and behave as two individuals who are indifferent to societal pressures and worldly concerns. Zhang Ailing writes, “Here in this uncertain

²²¹ Zhang Ailing, p.150.

²²² Zhang Ailing, p.156.

²²³ Zhang Ailing, p.158.

world, money, property, the permanent things – they’re all unreliable. The only thing she could rely on was the breath in her lungs, and this person who lay sleeping beside her.”²²⁴ In essence, the intrusion of war on Liuyuan and Liusu’s urban existence causes them to momentarily forget about worldly concerns and take pleasure in performing mundane tasks together, such as “preparing meals and cleaning house.”²²⁵ It is these everyday activities that make them behave like a couple and eventually convince them to finalize their relationship by becoming husband and wife. While Liuyuan and Liusu may have achieved a form of emotional fulfillment, Zhang Ailing’s description of their marriage is conspicuously devoid of any lofty romantic sentiments. In Zhang Ailing’s essay, “Writing of One’s Own,” she writes, “Although Liusu and Liuyuan’s marriage is healthy in some ways, it remains prosaic, earthbound, and, given their situation, it could be nothing more.”²²⁶

The conclusion of the story and Zhang Ailing’s choice of a title for this piece are significant, because they not only exhibit traditional literary influences on her writing, but also reveal her unconventional views on romance and disenchantment with China’s modernization. Zhang Ailing’s ending to the story in which Liusu achieves her objective only after “Hong Kong’s defeat,” is an example of her alternative political views and departure from the historical interpretation of the destabilizing effect of women on society.²²⁷ Instead of championing the collective good, Liusu’s victory represents the triumph of the personal over the collective. In essence, it is as if Zhang Ailing is arguing that the future happiness of women is not contingent upon the collective good of society,

²²⁴ Zhang Ailing, p.164.

²²⁵ Zhang Ailing, p.163.

²²⁶ Zhang Ailing, *Written on Water*, p.17.

²²⁷ Zhang Ailing, p.167.

but, on the contrary, freedom from the collective, as Liusu achieves her objective only after the collapse of Hong Kong.²²⁸ The conclusion and title of the story both allude to a traditional motif in classical Chinese literature in which a beautiful woman is blamed for the demise of the state: *qingcheng qingguo* (倾城倾国).²²⁹ In addition to referencing classical Chinese poetry earlier in the story, a literary technique that was eschewed by many May Fourth and revolutionary writers, Zhang Ailing's choice of a title for this piece further demonstrates the influences of traditional Chinese literature on her writing.

Finally, the conclusion of the story illustrates Zhang Ailing's anti-romantic views in which romance can only be realized after the destruction of civilization. The collapse of Liuyuan and Liusu's civilization due to warfare allows them to realize a prosaic and earthbound form of romance. Thus, similar to the other stories analyzed in this chapter, high-minded romantic ideals are subjugated by the mundane. Moreover, as Leo Lee suggests, the destruction of their civilization due to modern forms of warfare is evidence that "the world that is doomed is not the traditional China but the modern world of war and revolution."²³⁰ This is an example of Zhang Ailing's nihilistic attitude toward the goals espoused by her left-leaning contemporaries, as well as those who believed that China's salvation hinged on its modernization. In stark contrast to the Darwinian interpretation of history that was so common among many intellectuals, in Zhang Ailing's literary world, the Westernization and modernization of China cannot necessarily be equated with progress.

²²⁸ Lee, Haiyan, p.136.

²²⁹ Nicole Huang, "Eileen Chang and Alternative Wartime Fiction," p.460.

²³⁰ Lee, Leo, p.298.

Conclusion

Writing during a period of political and social upheaval, Zhang Ailing chose to concern herself with portraying an alternative view on romance and the everyday lives of common urbanites, as opposed to writing resistance or revolutionary literature. Although the war does serve as the background to “Sealed Off,” it is largely overshadowed by the romantic game being enacted by the story’s two protagonists. In “Red Rose, White Rose,” which was also written in the midst of the Japanese occupation, the reader will notice that the war is conspicuously absent from the narrative. Only in “Love in a Fallen City” does warfare affect the narrative, as it creates the rare circumstances for the realization of a mundane form of romantic love. Living in Shanghai during the Japanese occupation, there were obviously issues of censorship that Zhang Ailing had to tactfully avoid if she wanted her pieces to be published, but her decision to remain in Shanghai and publish alternative wartime fiction demonstrates her individualistic and nonpolitical focus.

Through an analysis of “Sealed Off” and “Red Rose, White Rose,” Zhang Ailing’s anti-romantic views on romance are exhibited in the characters’ failure to realize their romantic dreams. Zhang Ailing presents traditional romantic conventions through the characters’ experiences of genuine pleasure and emotional fulfillment, but devalues these attributes by showing them as transitory and surreal. The dream-like quality associated with these romantic encounters, whether it is Lu Zongzhen and Wu Cuiyuan, or Tong Zhenbao and Wang Jiaorui, further emphasizes their impracticality in a world that is highly commercialized and calculating. Moreover, their eventual displacement with the mundane realities of urban existence epitomizes Zhang Ailing’s cynical attitude toward romance and the emptiness of modern existence. “Love in a Fallen City,”

however, is an anomaly in the sense that the story concludes with the male and female protagonist attaining a semblance of emotional fulfillment, albeit in a very prosaic and earthbound manner.

Finally, the failure of many of Zhang Ailing's characters in these three stories to achieve complete emotional fulfillment can also be attributed to living in a precarious environment where both traditional and modern influences are present. The difficulties the modern urban man and woman confronted in trying to cope with a society experiencing unprecedented social and political change are evident in all of these pieces. Living in 1940s China, the pressures of modernity and the ever-present influences of traditionalism created an uncertain environment full of contradictions and devoid of any categorical standards of moral behavior. As a result of having to live in a transitional society that was in a constant state of flux and turmoil, the characters in these stories frequently experienced moments of discontent and alienation. The romantic fantasy that occurred between Lu Zongzhen and Wu Cuiyuan in "Sealed Off" is made possible only because of their intense longing for emotional fulfillment and liberation from their banal existence. The dilemma Tong Zhengbao faced in "Red Rose, White Rose" where he was forced to choose between following his heart or conforming to traditional notions of ethical behavior, is also a consequence of having to live in an environment where traditionalism and modernism are juxtaposed. The male protagonist in "Love in a Fallen City," Fan Liuyuan, is also depicted as struggling to come to terms with the ambivalent and mutable environment of 1940s China. The general failure of the characters in these three stories to escape from their desolate existence demonstrates Zhang Ailing's fatalistic view on the ability of the modern urban man and woman to transcend their

environment. Perhaps this also reflects her audience's desire to escape from the war and occupation that seemed to envelop their world, but their ultimate inability to do so.

CONCLUSION

Zhang Ailing's extensive translation work on Han Bangqing's *Sing-song Girls of Shanghai* not only helped to increase the novel's readership, but has also created an irrevocable link between herself and this late Qing courtesan novel. The connection between these two authors is highlighted by their similar views on romance. The characters in Han Bangqing and Zhang Ailing's works experience moments of romantic pleasure and emotional fulfillment, but these moments are often surreal and transitory, only to be superseded with the dismal realization that the environment in which they live is not conducive to the pursuit of love.

Situated in Shanghai, the commercial atmosphere of the modern city infused these authors' writings and this is reflected in their unconventional interpretation of romance. From the behavior of the courtesans and clients in the *Sing-song Girls of Shanghai* to Zhang Ailing's modern urbanites, romantic relationships are similar to a commercial transaction – that is, they are generally based on “interest calculation and exchange.”²³¹ Moreover, for the women in these authors' pieces, achieving romantic fulfillment is not necessarily their end-all goal. Instead, many of them pursue romance in the hope that it will lead to marriage, which will then guarantee them economic security and social respectability. For the characters in Han Bangqing and Zhang Ailing's stories to achieve a semblance of emotional fulfillment, their relationships must be prosaic and devoid of lofty romantic sentiment. The relationships between Benevolence Hong and Twin Pearl, two main characters in the *Sing-song Girls of Shanghai*, and the male and female protagonist in “Love in a Fallen City” are examples of the successful type of romantic relationships. The fact that these types of romances are anomalies in both authors' works

²³¹ Zou, p. 29.

highlights the futility of pursuing romantic love in the complex environment of the modern city.

In addition to offering valuable insights on the pursuit of romance during the transitional periods of the late Qing and Republican era, Han Bangqing and Zhang Ailing's works also shed light on China's attempt at modernization and its effect on the country's common urbanites. The behavior, dress, and rhetoric of the high-class Shanghai courtesans, which is vividly depicted in Han Bangqing's *Sing-song Girls of Shanghai*, played a fundamental role in the fashioning of a new urban culture and greatly expanded the public role for women. From riding in open-style carriages through Shanghai's bustling avenues to mingling freely with males in the city's public parks, the Shanghai courtesan was at the forefront in creating a new and modern image for women, as well as opening these public spaces up for concubines and respectable women to follow.²³² Moreover, the Shanghai courtesans' assertive and, at times, defiant behavior while in the company of her clients presaged the behavior of Republican-era women, who played a much more active role in their romantic relationships. Catherine Yeh, in her study of Shanghai courtesans, argues "the Shanghai courtesan of the late Qing established herself as the city's first modern professional woman. She was the first to articulate the manner in which urban women would behave, and in many aspects, her lifestyle and habits prefigure those of the Shanghai urbanite of the Republican period."²³³ It is the contention of this paper that the bold behavior of the Shanghai courtesan, illustrated in the writing of Han Bangqing, was instrumental in breaking down traditional barriers and paving the way for the emergence of the modern urban woman.

²³² Yeh, Catherine, *Shanghai Love*, p. 342.

²³³ Yeh, Catherine, *Shanghai Love*, p. 4.

In contrast to the portrayal of the high-class courtesans, the male characters in Han Bangqing's novel struggle to adjust to the fast-paced and mutable environment of Shanghai. When juxtaposed with their female partners, their lack of cunning and initiative becomes even more foregrounded. Living during the transitional period of the late Qing, the failure and weaknesses of these male characters represents the larger difficulties many urban men confronted when attempting to come to terms with a society in flux, typified by the fundamental restructuring of gender roles. As the character of Benevolence Hong indicates, the urban male's ability to acclimate to the fast-paced and ambivalent environment of the modern city ultimately represents the difference between the male's success or failure in that city. Those that thrive in this new world understand the intricacies of the modern city and astutely avoid the pitfalls of indulging in an outdated romantic fantasy. They refrain from deploring the passing of the traditional order and they embrace, or grudgingly accept, the new and larger role of women in their society.

Furthermore, the author populates the novel with a diverse group of male characters: merchants, members of the landed gentry, and petty officials. However, one characteristic they all share is their interest in business affairs instead of classical scholarship and climbing the ladder of civil service success. This is indicative of the environment in which they interact, the commercialized city of Shanghai, and the profound transformation of Chinese society that they witnessed due to the country's initiation into the modern world. Knowledge of business practices and the world beyond China, such as foreign languages, is far more important and relevant to these men than

traditional pursuits of the literatus-official. Their appearance in the novel thus marks the emergence of the modern urban male.

Similar to Han Bangqing, the male characters in Zhang Ailing's stories do not possess heroic qualities, nor are they paragons of virtue. Instead, they represent the evolution and subsequent decline of Han Bangqing's developing urbanite. As Kam Louie asserts, they tend to be "mostly broken men...[who are often] reliant upon family wealth to maintain their dissolute lifestyles."²³⁴ Zhang Ailing's negative depiction of males in her writing combines aspects of her troubled childhood, growing up with an abusive father, with her personal observations of 1940s Shanghai men. Zhang Ailing's extremely harsh portrayal of Tong Zhenbao in "Red Rose, White Rose" exemplifies her pessimistic assessment of the modern urban male. In addition to depicting the modern urban male in an unfavorable light, Zhang Ailing also draws attention to his fervent desire for female companionship. In the three pieces analyzed in this paper, the male protagonists' seek romantic partners who will not only better understand them, but who will also serve as a means of self-definition; for these men, Zhang Ailing portrays female companionship as creating the male characters' sense of identity, which they crave as they live in an ambivalent society. For Tong Zhenbao in "Red Rose, White Rose," this means marrying an obedient wife whom he does not love in order to maintain his self-image of mastery over the world. As for "Love in a Fallen City's" Fan Liuyuan, he pursues Bai Liusu, a woman whom he is attracted to because of her perceived "Chineseness," in order to acquire a more authentic Chinese cultural identity. Through the insecurity inherent in her representations of the modern urban male, Zhang Ailing, much like Han Bangqing,

²³⁴ Louie, p. 16.

reveals a society in flux, one with changing gender roles for both men and women; furthermore, she reveals the unease with which individuals regard these changes.

While the men in her pieces tend to be dissolute characters, the females are portrayed as coming to a realization about the inherent emptiness of their quotidian lives. For example, the main female character in “Sealed Off” epitomizes the modern, urban woman through her education and occupation as an English instructor, which symbolizes her refinement within Chinese society. Despite her accomplishments, Wu Cuiyuan views her life as empty and devoid of meaning because of the artificial nature of her existence. For instance, she lives her life in accord with her parents’ requirements, not because of her own desires. Furthermore, she sees the inherent affectedness of her parents’ life through their adherence to Western values and customs that they do not genuinely understand. For Wu Cuiyuan, a life with meaning and fulfillment requires following individual passion, which she craves but ultimately fails to achieve. With the exception of Bai Liusu in “Love in a Fallen City,” most of Zhang Ailing’s female characters exhibit this fervent desire for the real or tangible, a desire that Zhang Ailing portrays as unreachable. Through her representation of these female characters, Zhang Ailing demonstrates modernity’s inability to solve the social problems of her time.

When compared with Han Bangqing’s *Sing-song Girls of Shanghai*, it can be surmised that five decades of modernization had done relatively little to resolve the social and political problems that plagued Zhang Ailing’s China. The student movements following the collapse of the Qing government, which championed science, democracy, and the Western concept of “free love,” were largely ineffectual at reforming the country. Zhang Ailing demonstrates this view in “Sealed Off” when the story’s male protagonist,

who had been a participant in these demonstrations, later becomes a willing partner in an arranged marriage. Moreover, while the Westernization of China's males, typified by Fan Liuyuan and Tong Zhenbao, provided them with practical business skills, their moral corruption upon their return to China illustrates Zhang Ailing's cynical attitude toward the ability of these returnee males to solve the country's pressing problems. Although the women in Zhang Ailing's pieces enjoy greater freedoms than their traditional predecessors due to China's modernization efforts, the pleasures associated with modern life turn out to be illusory for many of them. For these women, the modernization of China has forced them to come to terms with a myriad of new challenges, among which, and perhaps the most daunting, was the pursuit of one's marriage partner. Living in 1940s Shanghai, where the competing forces of modernism and traditionalism were both present, the modern urbanite struggles immensely to find their proper roles, as defined by romance and marriage, in this new and precarious world. Their lives, as depicted by Zhang Ailing, generally lack definition as they are consumed with feelings of discontent and alienation.

The writing of these two Shanghai authors sheds light on China's modernization efforts during the late Qing and Republican era and provides us with a more nuanced understanding of how the country's transformation into a modern state affected its common urbanites and their pursuit of romantic fulfillment. Han Bangqing presents the incipient stage of the modernization of China in the *Sing-song Girls of Shanghai* through his portrayal of Shanghai Courtesans and their clientele. By allowing the Shanghai courtesans to be seen in public spaces and to play a larger role in their romantic relationships, Han Bangqing demonstrates the ways in which Western ideas and customs

influenced Chinese notions of romance and urban modernity. The commercialization of Shanghai illustrated by the dearth of traditional scholars and the abundance of merchants in the novel further attests to the Western infiltration of Chinese society. These monumental changes gradually led to the relaxation of gender boundaries and the demise of the traditional romantic experience that was modeled on the “talented scholar meets beautiful lady” motif. Zhang Ailing, through her three pieces analyzed in the paper, expands upon this idea by depicting women as a fixture of Shanghai’s public spaces. While the men and women that populate Zhang Ailing’s works enjoy greater freedoms and opportunities than their traditional predecessors, their lives are anything but ideal, as they are forced to come to terms with a society in flux and a devastating war with Japan. It is no wonder then that the term Zhang Ailing uses most in her writing is desolation (*cangliang* 苍凉), as it concisely summarizes her pessimistic view of human nature and the modern urban experience.

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