

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

BY

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	1
Chapter One: Wang Anyi’s Life and Writings.....	3
Chapter Two: The Song of Everlasting Sorrow: Interpreting the Subtextual Meaning of “Everlasting Sorrow” in Wang Anyi’s Tale of Wang Qiyao.....	15
Chapter Three: Writing Shanghai: One City, Two Different Approaches – A Comparative Analysis between Zhang Ailing and Wang Anyi.....	40
Chapter Four: Conclusion.....	66
Bibliography.....	73

ABSTRACT

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

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

Chapter One:

Wang Anyi's Life and Writings

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter Two:

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

A Summary of the Song of Everlasting Sorrow

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

⁶⁷ Chang, *Written on Water*, 16.

⁶⁸ Chang, *Written on Water*, 17.

⁶⁹ Chang, *Written on Water*, 18.

⁷⁰ Chang, *Written on Water*, 16.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

