

TRADITION AND MODERNITY IN ZHANG AILING'S SHORTSTORIES

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ABSTRACT. *Tradition and Modernity in Zhang Ailing's shortstories.* Zhang Ailing has been considered as a pioneer in Chinese literary modernism, due to her anti romantic vision of society and her continuous search for new forms and means of expression. Her unique style resides precisely in the continuation and modernization of the old Chinese literary schools like Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies or New Sensationists and partial affiliation to the new ones like May 4th literary movement. This article aims at pointing out, the way in which the writer manages to embrace both the traditional Chinese literary style and morals of society, with the modernist techniques and lifestyle. We consider that this perpetual transition from the old towards the new is to be found not only in the narrative techniques, but also in the choice of plot, the construction of characters, time and space or language.

Keywords: *modernism, May 4th Movement, New Culture Movement, budoir realism.*

REZUMAT. *Tradiție și modernitate în povestirile lui Zhang Ailing.* Zhang Ailing a fost considerată drept un inițiator al modernismului în literatura chineză, prin perspectiva anti-romantică asupra societății și prin continua căutare a unor forme și mijloace noi de exprimare. Stilul ei unic constă în continuarea și modernizarea vechilor școli literare chinezești precum cea a Rațelor Mandarine și a Fluturilor sau cea a Noilor Percepționiști, precum și asocierea parțială cu cele noi, precum mișcarea literară de la 4 Mai. Scopul acestui articol este acela de a vedea în ce măsură scriitoarea reușește să îmbine stilul literar chinezesc tradițional și morala societății cu tehnicile narrative moderniste și stilul de viață modern. Această continuă tranziție dinspre vechi spre nou, considerăm că se poate regăsi atât în tehnicile narrative folosite, dar și în alegerea tematicii, construcția personajelor, redarea timpului și a spațiului sau limbajul folosit.

Cuvinte cheie: *modernism, Mișcarea 4 Mai, Noua Mișcare Culturală, realism de budoir.*

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0. Argument

The subject of this article is focused mainly on the original way in which Zhang Ailing, a writer who was born and lived the first part of her life in a society at the boundary between two historical periods: the end of Qing dynasty (1911) and the establishment of the Republic (1912-1949), manages to combine in her short stories features of both classical Chinese novel and modern literary forms imposed by the May 4th movement¹ period.

Born in 1920, in Shanghai, during the May 4th movement's political events, Zhang Ailing's childhood suffered the influence of the New Culture Movement² upon Chinese traditional society.

Her parents embraced different opinions on life and education. Her mother was an adept of the modern changes of society, while her father cherished the old Confucian morals. She was forced to live either with her divorced mother, who was constantly travelling abroad and rarely coming back on mainland, or with her opium addict father, who imposed highly traditional educational standards on her, which she was unable to fulfill. These two environmental backgrounds affected her and gave rise to that double perspective that she uses in her writings, being neither able to completely break up with the past, nor to fully embrace the present.

In this article we choose to present Zhang's double perspective in her well-known short stories: *Aloeswood Incense: The first brazier, Jasmine tea, Love in a Fallen City, The Golden Cangue, Sealed Off and Red Rose, White Rose*. Three of them: *Jasmine tea, Love in a Fallen City* and *Red Rose, White Rose*, have been included in the short-story collection *Romances (Chuanqi)* which appeared in 1944, the other ones being published individually.

For our study we have used the short story volume entitled *Love in a Fallen City*, published in 2007, which includes all of her best known and appreciated short-stories and which keeps the writers' own English translation for some of them.

Our analysis aims at pointing out the way in which Zhang's double perspective is to be seen in her choice of narrative techniques, plot, construction of characters, time and space or language. Thus, our study seeks to bring into attention a problem which has been less analyzed but which we believe best defines her literary style.

¹ May 4th Movement refers to the students' revolt which took place in Beijing, in 1919. They protested against the decision taken at the Versailles Treaty, after the end of the First World War, to pass all the German possessions in China to the Japanese instead of the Chinese.

² New Culture Movement began in 1916, after the revolution in 1911, which led to the fall of the Qing dynasty, failed to turn China into a republic. This failure made the intellectuals believe that it was the Confucian cultural heritage which prevented China from developing as fast as Japan or the West. As a consequence, a group of intellectuals called for a new type of literature, a new way of thinking and orientation towards the modern life.

1. General considerations on Zhang Ailing's short stories

Zhang Ailing has been included by critics among the Chinese modernist writers and focused, most of them, on the way she depicts the relationship between men and women. Her works are assigned with traces of sensuality and melancholy and aim at portraying the human relationships and the way people react to everyday facts of a changing society.

The writer's tendency to take from the old literary forms, what she considers necessary to add to the new modernist techniques, in order to come to new and original forms of expression, make her unique in her time.

Zhang herself, in *Works of my own*³, said that her writings cannot be assigned to a particular topic and that their specific lies in the fact that they belong neither to the traditional, nor to the modern literature. She directly expressed the desire that the writer should be able to take what he wants from her writings and not being forced to assign the narrative material to a specific topic.

[T]he main theme of my work's sometimes isn't clear... It may be that the difference between modern literature and past literature lies right here: we no longer emphasize a main theme but allow the story to give what it can and the reader to take whatever is available. (Kirk A. Danton, 1996, 19-24)

A distinctive feature of her short stories is that they are written in the literary style of *Mandarin ducks and butterflies*⁴. The writer still, chooses to leave apart the heroic figures faced with a cruel destiny, which appear in these *modern sentimental novels*, and build characters who are actually common people, faced with everyday reality. Zhang rejects heroism and prefers tragedy, and even more, desolation because, she said, both of them are more genuine:

I have noticed that those involved in literature often emphasize that which is active and exciting in human life and ignore that which is stable and calm. Actually the latter is the formation of the former... Even though this calm stability is often incomplete and must be broken every now and then, it is still eternal...I do not like heroism. I like tragedy, but I like desolation more. Heroism has only strength, but no beauty, as it lacks human nature.

³ This essay appeared in 1996, in *Modern Chinese literary thought. Writings on literature 1893-1945*. This work includes 55 essays on the first period of modern Chinese literature, 47 of them being translated here for the first time.

⁴ The literary style of *Mandarin ducks and butterflies* (*Yuan Yang Hudie Pai*) appeared in China in the first half of the 20th century. It included topics like love, murder or revenge and focused mainly on the love between a poor scholar and a rich woman. Due to the fact that this kind of literature has been mainly used as subject to film playwright, the Chinese literary critics have neglected it and considered it as a less cultivated type of literature.

Tragedy is like the combination of true red and true green, a powerful contrast. Yet it is better at stimulating than inspiring. Desolation leaves an even longer aftertaste because like the green of scallions and the red of peaches it is an uneven contrast... (idem)

Zhang also found her inspiration in the stories of New Sensationists⁵, especially in the way they portrayed the life of the city. Though their literature is a minor one, mainly experimental, they are important for placing the accent on the individual and his inner self, an aspect which was not explored before. Their fiction “is usually built on a fixed formula- a psychologically abnormal male protagonist coming across a *femme fatale*. Narrated from the mentally ill protagonist’s viewpoint and over-emphasizing the subconscious, such stories are broken up into absurd, fragmentary episodes that fail to point to any concrete themes.” (Hoyan, F. Carole, 1996, 158) Zhang’s short stories, on the other side, are well-built, and explore the theme of love in a changing society. The city with its modern lifestyle is used only as a background to portray different stories, in which the accent is set on the individual and his struggle with understanding and accepting himself as human being with faults and desires.

What is also interesting is that, despite the fact that she lived during a time of political changes, she chose not to tackle the topic of history in her short stories. War is seen only as background for the development of events. The reader is dealing with different life experiences in a changing society, the writer offering, thus, a subjective perspective upon history.

Zhang’s characters are nothing but common people who try to build their identity in a falling world, and who realize, after some life experiences, that they overestimated themselves. We do not encounter heroes, but, actually weak people, who manage to face their weaknesses only after dealing with real life.

The love stories have nothing to do with romanticism, because the female characters choose to marry either to reach a higher social status, or just for the sake of marriage. They are incapable of completely entrusting themselves to their love ones, and if they still manage to do this, they discover that they were just subjects of simple love affairs.

Zhang’s short stories were described by critics as including both elements of the traditional Chinese literature and Western ones, especially elements of Freudian psychology. (idem, 1996, 97)

At the beginning of the 20th century, Freudianism, together with Marxism and Darwinism, were imported to China and started influencing many Chinese scholars. Five of Freud’s major works, together with other several critical works

⁵ New Sensationists also known as New Perceptionists, were a group of writers, which appeared in Shanghai in the 1930s. Among them the most important were Mu Shiyong, Liu Na’ou, and Shi Zhecun. They wrote mainly short stories about the life of the city, focusing on aspects like dance halls, neon lights, and looming madness alongside modern lifestyles, gender roles, and social problems.

about him, were translated into Chinese by 1949. So, during the mid 30's, his theory was familiar to the intellectuals and partially to the public. Consequently, Freud's theory is to be seen in modern Chinese literature with accent set on the inner self of the individual. (Wang, Yuan, 2006, 39)

Zhang's short stories focus on themes like family, love, adultery and marriage, so Freud's psychoanalysis gives her the opportunity to better express her characters' mind.

Her anti romantic vision of society, and depiction of the inside world of the individual, bring her closer to modernism, and make her one of the representative writers of this style in Chinese literature.

2. Features of Modernism

Modernism has been defined as "a term used to identify new and distinctive features in the subjects, forms, concepts, and styles of literature and the other arts in the early decades of the present century, but especially after World War I (1914-18). The specific features signified by "modernism" (or by the adjective modernist) vary with the user, but many critics agree that it involves a deliberate and radical break with some of the traditional bases not only of Western art, but of Western culture in general." (Abrams, M. H., 1999, 167) As a literary trend it bears features such as: feelings like alienation, loss or despair, importance of the subjective experience over the objective one, desire to create new artistic forms, reaction to romanticism which leads to the portrayal of a pessimistic and even tragic world. As means of construction it is known for the continuous breaking of the narrative, use of new ways of presenting the characters and by breaking the syntax coherence through the introduction of the flow of consciousness. (Hoyan, F. Carole, 1996, 99)

In China, *modernism* appeared after the fall of the late Qing dynasty and establishment of the republic, in 1911. At that time, many intellectuals felt the necessity to break up with the old literary tradition and start a reform, especially in what concerned the language. The old classical language was far too complicated so, with the help of Hu Shi, who had recently returned from studying abroad, they introduced and spread the vernacular language, as means of educating the masses. In his articles, *Tentative proposal for literary reform (Wenxue gailiang chuyi)* and *Constructive literary revolution (Jianshe de wenxue geming)*, Hu Shi proposed a new national literature, written not in the classical, but in the vernacular, the living *national language (guoyu)* of the people. As a consequence, there appeared a literary reform, known as *The Literary Renaissance*, which was part of the New Culture Movement and aimed to introduce a necessary culture and socio-political reform.

Chinese *modernism* is characterized by a conscious break up with Confucian morals, which led, first of all, to the reinterpretation of the old family

life. The young students, who returned home from studying abroad, felt that the old way of life and filial duty, required by the Confucian doctrine, do not apply to their new living standards anymore. So “the individual is released from the collective responsibility of the whole family, and assumes his rights and duties as an independent member of a larger society-the nation.” (Chen, W. P., 2007, 54)

The huge changes in the younger generation made the government concerned and in need for some measures to be taken, so there appeared a new movement, called New Life Movement, led by general Chiang Kai-Shek. He suggested that people should return to the virtues taught by sages and offered a personal interpretation of them in *An Outline of the Principles*: “Li means regulated attitude (of mind as well as heart); Yi means right conduct; Lien means clear discrimination (honesty in personal, public and official life); Chih means self consciousness (integrity and honesty).” (idem, 55) At the same time, the government officially stated the importance of preserving what is valuable in China’s culture, and adopting only those Western new ideas and cultural aspects that the country needs.

In her short stories, Zhang Ailing seems to embrace this idea of reviving the past and adapting it to the new changing society. She does not give up the old literary forms, but, on the contrary, finds her inspiration in them. The classical novel *Dream of the Red Chamber (Hong Lou Meng)* has been a major source of inspiration for her, giving rise to, what the critics have called, *budoir realism*, referring to her literary style.

Besides this, the writer explored the *Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies* style, but managed to go further, by choosing topics like: love, adultery, flirting or courtship. Her characters are not seen as heroes or victims of a cruel destiny, but mere people with faults and weaknesses, who, after being subjects of some life experiences, discover their true self and struggle to accept it.

2.1. A subjective perspective on history

A major modernist feature of her short stories is that of choosing not to focus on the political changes of the society and describe the war and its destructive power. Zhang chooses, instead, to present everyday activities, in order to shape the personality of the characters and to point out the way in which these activities change their way of thinking and seeing life.

A good example is the story in *Sealed Off*, settled in a tram, stopped due to a Japanese attack. The writer offers merely no details of what is going on outside the tram, but, instead, chooses to focus on the emotions of two people stuck inside: a teacher, Wu Cuiyuan and an accountant, Lu Zongzhen. The few descriptive details that she offers to the reader about the outside world refer also to people’s feelings and reactions. Thus, we see that:

The tramcar stopped but the people on the street started rushing around: those on the left rushed over to the right, those on the right rushed over to the left. ... Matrons tugged madly at the bars. "Let us in!" they cried. "At least for a little while! There are children here, and old people too!" But the gates stayed tightly shut. (Chang, Eileen, 2007, 237)

Inside the tramcar, the two people have some moments of sincerity and see each other not as their family or friends do, but as they truly are. Waiting for the tramcar to start going again, the two of them initiate a flirt which might have ended in an adultery. Their short relationship ends the moment in which the tramcar starts going again. Cuiyuan is disappointed to see that Zongzhen returns to his seat as if nothing had happened and thinks that maybe everything has been just a dream, a mere projection of her inner desire to meet someone who can love her as she is.

The love story in *Love in a Fallen City* takes place at the end of the Second World War. The main characters are Bai Liusu, a 28 years old divorced woman, and Fan Liuyuan, a businessman, who, at the beginning seeks only to make Liusu his mistress. The war experience makes the two of them realize that they really love each other, and helps them get closer in a genuine way.

Here, in this uncertain 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. Suddenly, she crawled over to him, hugging him through his quilt. He reached out from the bedding and grasped her hand. They looked and saw each other, saw each other entirely. It was a mere moment of deep understanding, but it was enough to keep them happy together for a decade or so. (Chang, Eileen, 2007, 164)

Although war takes lives and destroys states, for Liusu it is a creative force which brings her love and makes her realize what true love really means. She questions herself whether the society must decay so as the individual to become aware of himself. Thus the reader wonders if the old society really must be destroyed so as the new one to emerge.

Hong Kong's defeat had brought Liusu victory. But in this unreasonable world, who can distinguish cause from effect? Who knows which is which? Did a great city fall so that she could be vindicated? Countless thousands of people dead, countless thousands of people suffering, after that an earthshaking revolution... (Chang, Eileen, 2007, 167)

2.2. The struggle with the self

Another modernist aspect of Zhang's short stories is the characters' continuous struggle with their self. Most of them are unable to understand and

accept themselves as they truly are, so they end up getting involved in relationships which only bring them suffering and disappointment. They are emotionally unstable, fragile beings, victims of the traditional morals of society. As a consequence, they are forced to build up a fake personality, to match the standards of the society and realize, at a certain point, that they are unable to build up inter-human relationships so as to fulfill their need of being loved. After several attempts, in which they fail to do this, these characters end up by being disappointed not only to their loved ones, but to themselves as well. They cannot break up with the traditional education which valued the filial piety and underlined the different status of men and women, so they fail to adapt to the modern society influenced by the West. They find themselves trapped between the old and the new, incapable of accepting themselves and being genuine.

Ge Weilong from *Aloeswood. The first burning* and Tong Zhenbao, from *Red Rose. White rose*, are characters who think they know each other well enough, but end up by being disappointed with themselves and their choices.

Ge, is a young student, who seeks refuge in her aunt's house, by asking her to financially support her studies in Hong Kong. She received a well education and lived to fulfill her parents desire to study well. Her aunt, a divorced woman, was well known in the high society for her extravagant lifestyle and her relationships with rich men. Ge decides to stay with her aunt, thinking that she could continue living as before, and not giving up on the traditional education that she received. Life proved her that she was wrong, since she let herself be pulled inside this vicious world of luxury and parties, and ended up seduced by George Qiao, a young man whose main purpose was to get rich and with whom she finally gets married. It was a simple New Year's Eve night spent outside, with her husband, the point in which, after seeing some prostitutes harassed by a few drunken and willing men, she realizes the failure of her marriage. Now, she becomes aware that she let herself used not only by her husband, for whom she produced money, but also by her aunt, for whom she found several rich men, to help her financially. Her words are not understood by George, but are enough to make her realize a truth that she had been trying to hide inside herself:

"Those drunken mudfish," George said with a smile. "What do they take you for?"

"But how am I any different from those girls?"

Steering with one hand, George reached out with the other to cover her mouth. "Talk such nonsense again and..."

"Yes, yes! I was wrong, I admit it," Weilong apologized. "How could there not be any difference between us? They don't have a choice-I do it willingly!" (Chang, Eileen, 2007, 76)

Tong Zhenbao, on the other side, thinks he managed to create an ideal world, where he is the sole master, a world that he can control. For those who

knew him, he is the ideal son, the best husband, the most hard-working employee and the friend in need. In order not to lose all this, he gives up on the two women with whom he falls in love, because a relationship with them was outside the traditional morals.

Rose is a sociable young girl, who does not watch her words too much and "whose body was open for the talking". Thus, he doesn't take into consideration the possibility of marrying her, because she is not a good match for a genuine Chinese, like him, whose country still cherished the idea that woman must stay indoors and avoid contact with strangers, especially men.

Jiaorui, the second woman with whom he falls in love, his friend's wife, breaks his expectations when she decides to be sincere and tell her husband about their affair. Thus, she puts Zhenbao in front of a choice that he cannot make. Instead, he chooses to obey the filial duty and not to upset his mother, who had set some high standards for him. The result is that he gives up on Jiaorui, and dares even to suggest her to return to her husband. The years have passed and the two of them meet in a bus. Their encounter makes him realize that his perfect world is nothing but an illusion, and that his choice was a mistake. Zhenbao cannot help and cries in front of her, this moment being the only one in his life when he is sincere with himself:

Zhenbao wanted to sum up his perfectly happy life in a few simple words, but as he was trying to find them, he looked up and saw his face in the small mirror on the bus driver's right. ... All at once, Zhenbao's face really did begin to quiver; in the mirror he saw tears streaming down... he didn't know why. Shouldn't she have been the one to weep? It was all wrong, and yet he couldn't stop. She should be weeping, he should be comforting her. But Jiaorui didn't comfort him.... (Chang, Eileen, 2007, 299)

Jasmine tea speaks about the necessity of finding a better self-identity. The main character, Nie Chuanqing, is a student who accidentally discovers that his professor, Yan Ziyue, in the past, had given a book to his mother, Feng Biluo. This small detail enables him to create an imaginary world, in which he is the professor's son, instead of his opium addict father. His life with a man who constantly reminded him that he is good for nothing and couldn't bring him anything but shame, makes him become jealous of Yan Danzhu, the professor's daughter.

If he were Ziyue and Biluo's child, his mind would be so much deeper, so much reflective, than Danzhu's. And a child with a loving family is always full of confidence and fellow-feeling-active, vigorous and brave, whatever the vagaries of his life. So he would have all of Danzhu's strengths, and all the ones she lacked, too. (Chang, Eileen, 2007, 95)

Danzhu's intentions to help him at school and her constant presence around him are misunderstood by Chuanqing, who starts fantasizing about

her being in love with him. His distorted mind starts to see this situation as a possibility to escape from his present and be a real man, like his father wanted. In this way he could stop being controlled by others and take control over himself thus, seeking revenge for all he lacked.

If she loved him, he would have power over her, he could subject her to all sorts of subtle psychological tortures. That was his only hope for revenge. (Chang, Eileen, 2007, 103-104)

After a Christmas Eve party, on the way back home, the two of them have a conversation and Chuanqing realizes that his expectations were way too high and Danzhu only sees him as a friend. He cannot control himself and brutally attacks her, but then becomes aware that he has no escape from his destiny.

Chuanqing's tears ran, and his mouth twitched, as if he wanted to laugh. But he couldn't stir a muscle; it felt as if a shell of ice had frozen across his face. His body was encased in ice too. Danzhu was not dead. In a few days, when classes started again, he would still have to see her at school. He couldn't escape. (Chang, Eileen, 2007, 108)

By attacking Danzhu, Chuanqing seeks only to erase what reminds him of his prison life. He is trapped within his father's rigid education and his desire to be allowed to express his true identity.

This story could actually be seen as Zhang's way to plead for a harmonious mixture between the traditional and the modern. A changing society cannot remain stuck in the past, but it must take from the old tradition what is necessary in order to improve itself. On the other side a total break with tradition will not allow the society to be authentic, it would be just an attempt to copy some models emerging from outside, it would not let it be genuine.

2.3. Tragic revelation

Most of Zhang's characters have, at a certain point, a moment in which they face reality as it is and see each other in the true light. This moment, called by C. T. Hsia *tragic revelation* "...comes only at the moment in which the protagonist, temporarily outside the shell of his ego, surveys the desolation of his triumph or failure". (Hoyan, F. Carole, 1996, 126)

Such moments could be: Zhenbao's meeting with Jiaorui in the bus, when he weeps for his wrong choice, that in which war makes Liusu and Liuyuan see that they only have each other or Ge Weilong's sudden realization that she willingly sold his life both to her husband and her aunt. These Joycean moments of epiphany are short, the characters being unable to make a real change in their lives.

The writer herself stated in her essay *I See suqing*:

As a writer, I believe that my job is to understand the complexity of life. Even if I hate them [those about whom I wrote] at the beginning, I am only left with a kind of sad compassion, after I come to understand them... I can forgive their failings and sometimes even love them, because they exist and they are real. (idem, 128)

Her statement proves her feelings of compassion and sympathy for human suffering, since the writer herself had been subject to the same struggle with herself, stuck between her mother's desire to turn her into a modern woman and her father's constraint to stick to the old type of education.

Through this *tragic revelation* that she explores in her short stories, Zhang approaches Lu Xun's perspective in *Ah Q*, where the main character is deprived of his right to take part in the 1911 revolution and thus, turn into a hero, and instead, remains what he is, a simple peasant.

2.4. Writing techniques

As we have previously mentioned, Zhang Ailing thematically detaches from May 4th romanticism, but in terms of form and expression she follows its ideas. The writer prefers to turn to the old literary masterpieces, like *Dream of the Red Chamber (Hong Lou Meng)* to find her inspiration and create a new and unique style, which critics have called *budoir realism*. At the same time, like most of the Chinese modernist writers, she got familiar to the Western literature. She found her inspirations in the writings of Freud and Jung, whose ideas she used, in order to better reveal the inner self of her characters as well as their struggle to accept their weaknesses.

A particular writing technique that she uses comes from the old Chinese *hua ben*⁶ story-telling mode, which she improved and turned into a *framed narrative* technique. Consequently, we find that most of her short stories have a short introductory part, which the writer uses in order to give some reading suggestions to the readers. Thus, the reader knows that what is going to follow is pure fiction and treats it as such. The writer's suggestions have the only purpose of making the story more pleasant to read, of creating a more stimulating environment for the reader to enjoy what comes.

⁶ *Huaben* were texts which served as scripts for storytellers, puppet plays or operas. They were popular during the Song dynasty (960-1279) and included short stories, stories from history or buddhist ones. *Huaben* texts consisted mainly of narrative prose with interspersed poems, in which the plot was reflected and commented. www.chinaknowledge.de/Literature/Terms/huaben.html (accessed at 07.01.2020)

For example, *Aloeswood incense* starts as follows:

Go and fetch, will you please, a copper incense brazier, a family heirloom gorgeously encrusted now with moldy green, and light in it some pungent chips of aloeswood. Listen while I tell a Hong Kong tale, from before the war. When your incense has burned out, my story too will be over. (Chang, Eileen, 2007, 7)

We see that her indications are very precise and cautiously given to the reader, in order to settle the best environment for her story to develop.

Zhang's *Jasmine tea* story is better understood if the reader pours a cup of hot tea.

This Pot of jasmine tea that I've brewed for you may be somewhat bitter; this Hong Kong tale that I'm about to tell you may be, I'm afraid, just as bitter. Hong Kong is a splendid city, but a sad one too. First pour yourself a cup of tea, but be careful - it's hot! Blow on it gently. In the tea's curling steam you can see... (Chang, Eileen, 2007, 79)

In this introduction she even anticipates the nature of the events that are going to happen, by comparing the bitterness of her brewed tea with that of the story. She is also very attentive to the reader, suggesting not to drink the tea at once, but, instead, to enjoy it patiently. Her words seem like a warning addressed to the reader to go page by page and carefully digest and reflect on the message within.

2.5. Time and space

Zhang breaks up with the old literary tradition of using the chronological time, which enabled the reader to see the characters grow, not only physically, but also emotionally. She explicitly said that her purpose is not that of making history, but that of seeing people in different stages of their existence and pointing out their behavior under common circumstances. Consequently, she uses different innovative techniques in order to settle the time and space of her stories.

For example, in her story *Sealed off*, the relationship between Lu Zongzhen and Wu Cuiyuan lasts only for some minutes, during the Japanese blockade of the tramcar. The two of them meet, fell in love and separate in very short time. This *slice of life* is framed by the writer, who starts and ends her story with the same image of the tramcar:

The tramcar driver drove his tram ... The tramcar would have gone on forever, if the city hadn't been shut down. It was. The streets were sealed off. "Ding-ding-ding-ding" rang the bell. Each "ding" was a small,

cold dot: dot after dot, they formed a line that cut through space and time. (Chang, Eileen, 2007, 237)

The city started up again. "Ding-ding-ding-ding" rang the bell. Each "ding" was a small, cold dot: dot after dot, they formed a line that cut through space and time.

Cheers rippled through the vast city. The tram started clanking its way forward. (Chang, Eileen, 2007, 250)

The whole city seems like caught within a dream from which it wakes up only after the tramcar starts going again. Cuiyuan herself realizes that all that happened between them was nothing but an illusion, a dream or maybe an inner desire.

...Then she understood his meaning: everything that had happened while the city was sealed off was a nonoccurrence. The whole city of Shanghai had dozed off and dreamed an unreasonable dream. (Chang, Eileen, 2007, 250-251)

In *The Golden Cangue*, the writer deliberately contracts time, so as to underline human fragility, its lack of power to change destiny. The main character, Tsao Chi-chiao, looks twice in the mirror and realizes that, between the two instances, ten years had passed and she is still in the same place, unable to change her fate.

A gust of wind came into the window and blew against the long mirror in the scrollwork lacquered frame until it rattled against the wall. Chi-chiao pressed the mirror down with both hands. The green bamboo curtain and a green and gold landscape scroll reflected in the mirror went on swinging back and forth in the wind-one could get dizzy watching it for long. When she looked again the green bamboo curtain had faded, the green and gold landscape was replaced by a photograph of her deceased husband, and the woman in the mirror was also ten years older. (Chang, Eileen, 2007, 194)

In the same story time is also lengthened, so as to point out the painful separation between Chi-chiao and her beloved Chiang Chi-tse.

Chi-tse was gone. ... Drop by drop, the sour plum juice trickled down the table, keeping time like a water clock at night-one drip, another drip-the first watch of the night, the second watch-one year, a hundred years. (Chang, Eileen, 2007, 204)

In terms of space, Zhang uses long descriptive passages, inserted whenever necessary to slow down the development of plot events. These passages are usually very poetic, the writer making use of a refined language.

After meeting accidentally with Jiaorui in the bus, Zhenbao returns home. The music, coming down from the street, stands as a bridge between two realities: the one his soul sought for and the one imposed by the society.

Small white clouds floated in the blue sky above, and on the street a flute vendor was playing the flute—a sharp, soft, sinuous, Oriental tune that twisted and turned in the ear like embroidery, like a picture of a dream in a novel, a trail of white mist coming out from under the bed curtain and unfurling all sorts of images, slowly uncoiling like a lazy snake, till finally the drowsiness is just too great, and even the dream falls asleep. (Chang, Eileen, 2007, 300)

Space, in Zhang's short stories, is a mixture of old and new, of modernity intruding the traditional way of living. Detailed descriptive passages are used, in order to point out the character's inability to adapt to the new changes in the society. For example, Madame Liang's house, in *Aloeswood incense* is decorated so as to fit into the modern society, but, at the same time, to give the foreigners the China they heard about:

The white house in the dip of the hill was smooth and streamlined-geometric like an ultramodern movie theatre. The roof, however, was covered with the traditional glazed tiles of emerald green... The furniture and the arrangement were basically Western, touched up with some unexceptionable Chinese bric-a-brac. An ivory bodhisattva stood on the mantel of the fireplace, along with snuff bottles made of emerald-green jade; a small screen with a bamboo motif curved around the sofa. These Oriental touches had been put there, it was clear, for the benefit of the foreigners. The English come from so far to see China—one has to give them something of China to see. (Chang, Eileen, 2007, 8)

2.6. Construction of characters

Most of Zhang's short stories are focused on presenting slices of life, mainly usual facts, which enables her to display several features of her characters. In this way she detaches from classical Chinese novels, where the main characters bear both human and supernatural features, and wants the reader to see them as they really are: merely common people. Thus, she manages to break the barrier between fiction and reality, and the reader is left with the impression that what he reads is nothing but reality.

Another innovation is that of focusing mostly on the inner self of the characters, which places her among the modernist writers of her time. The physical details are less present in her short stories, but when she offers them she is very precise and chooses to point out the physical aspect of the characters with

slight sensual touches. Thus, in *Red rose, White rose* we are told that Rose has her legs "light and nimble, as delicately made as wooden legs in a shop; [and that] her skin was as smooth and glistening as freshly planed and oiled wood...." and that Jiaorui had "a tawny gold face, the skin glistening and the flesh so firm that her eyes rose at a long upward slant, like the eyes of an actress."

In the characterization of the male character, Tong Zhenbao, Zhang uses a lot of images which enables her to underline his personality. She starts from a simple fact, that of Jiaorui washing her hair and accidentally letting some soap drops fall on his hand, to develop a further attraction of Zhenbao towards her.

A little shampoo splashed the back of Zhenbao's hand. Instead of rubbing it off, he let it dry there. The skin puckered up slightly, as if a mouth were lightly sucking at the spot... Her striped dressing gown, worn without a belt, hugged her body loosely, and the black-and-white stripes hinted at her figure, each line, each inch, fully alive." (Chang, Eileen, 2007, 263-264)

A little later, when Zhenbao enters the shower and finds some of her hair on the bathroom floor, his male psychological sexuality is revealed even more.

Zhenbao stood outside the door holding his towel and watching the tangled hair, in the glare of the bathroom light, drifting across the floor. He felt quite agitated. He liked women who were fiery and impetuous, the kind you couldn't marry. Here was one who was already a wife, and a friend's wife at that, so there couldn't be any danger, but... look at that hair! It was everywhere. She was everywhere, tugging and pulling at him. (Chang, Eileen, 2007, 264)

Her freedom of expression and accent set on the characters' mind are also traces of modernism which are not to be found in the Qing dynasty's novels. Still, she keeps some features of classical novels such as the realism of descriptions, especially of characters' daily routine or of clothing as well as character typology.

In Zhang's short stories we find out many things about the characters just by seeing them talking, and thus discovering their likes and dislikes, their preferences for dressing or eating etc. This accent set on conversation, which draws out the characters' personality, she borrowed it from *Dream of the Red Mansion*, privilege for critics to define her style as *budoir realism*. This is also because most of the action of her short stories takes place inside doors, no matter if it is a mansion, a hotel, a restaurant or even a blocked tram.

In what concerns the character typology, Zhang underlines the discrepancy between male and female status by pointing out that men are wealthy and successful while women are weak, governed by the constraints of her family as well as those of the society.

Regarding this discrepancy between men and women's rights, the writer made a comment in her short story *Red rose, White rose*, revealing the reason behind the constraints imposed on women by the society. She regrets that after embracing the modern tendencies, the society fails to protect women as it did before, so they can easily lose their reputation.

In China, as elsewhere, the constraints imposed by the traditional moral code were originally constructed for the benefit of women: they made beautiful women even harder to obtain, so their value rose, and ugly women were spared the prospect of never-ending humiliation. Women nowadays don't have this kind of protective buffer, especially not mixed-blood girls, whose status is so entirely undefined. (Chang, Eileen, 2007, 286)

The different status of men and women derived from the Confucian doctrine, which was still respected in China until the foundation of the republic, on the 1st of October 1949. Confucius stated the importance of every member of the society to respect his place and obey their superiors. Women were forced to obey their father, then their husband and then their sons, so, they were never allowed to draw their own destiny.

Zhang tries to underline the importance of women's education for the development of their personality, but is aware that the road towards women's financial independence through education is a long one. In China, it was not until the end of the Qing dynasty, that a campaign to educate women was initiated. "Prior to the end of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), women's education was different, not only from that today but also from that of men at that time. The aim of traditional women's education was limited to the teaching of social ethics and family traditions, with an emphasis on how to become a virtuous wife and good mother." (Wong, Yin-Lee, 1995, 345)

Most of Zhang's female characters are educated women, but still they lack courage to take their destiny into their hands and free themselves from an arranged marriage. Women cannot live their love affairs due to family pressure of finding a suitable husband or due to their own fear of being subject to public shame, in case their loved ones refuse to marry them.

In *Love in a fallen city*, Liusu goes on with her relationship with Liuyuan, because she finds out that "what Liuyuan cared about was spiritual love. [and] She approved entirely, because spiritual love always leads to marriage, while physical love tends to reach a certain level and then stop, leaving little hope of marriage." (Chang, Eileen, 2007, 141)

After a fight with him she decides to go back home and find a job, but she thinks this decision over and realizes that it wouldn't help her much:

...if she took some menial job, she would lose her social status. Even though status wasn't something you could eat, losing it would be a pity. And she had not yet given up all hope concerning Fan Liuyuan. She couldn't sell herself cheaply now, or else he'd have a perfect excuse for refusing to marry her. So she just had to hang on a little longer." (Chang, Eileen, 2007, 153)

In *The Golden Cangue*, Tsao-Chi-Chiao waits more than 10 years for her sick husband to die, in order to inherit the fortune of the Chiang family. After the moment comes, she refuses to marry her daughter so that no other man should come for her money.

This family pressure of obeying the rules imposed by the society brings women on the verge of despair. They lack confidence in themselves and end up being alone, having no courage to follow their heart.

The old Chi-Chiao blames her family for constraining her to marry for money, but it is too late, and gives up on Chiang Chi-tse, his brother-in-law, whom she loved her entire life. Late is also for Ge Weilong, to escape a marriage without love and stand on her own feet, or for Wu Cuiyuan, who lost Lu Zongzheng, after the tram started going again, because of her childish belief that if he couldn't remember her telephone number, that would mean he didn't love her.

Thus, Zhang's female characters, cannot escape the three concentric circles which enclose them:

The largest circle consists of educational limitations set on their potential development. The next one is the deep feeling of financial insecurity which acts as their sole conscious or unconscious motive in their orientation and organization of their lives. The center circle is the situation of physical or emotional isolation which helplessly confines certain women in Zhang Ailing's stories to a severe degree of alienation. (Le, Nga, 1989, 7)

Male, characters, on the other side, do not have to face the financial insecurity and do not lack education as female characters do. Most of them come from wealthy families, who provided them with a good education, allowing them to study abroad. Still, the writer points out that they are also subjects of the family constraints, which derive from the same old morals of society.

Tong Zhenbao is forced to give up on Jiaorui, because his mother disapproved his relationship and insisted that he should go on with his career.

Oh, dear! Here I've been waiting so long till you'd finished your schooling and begun your career. Now that you're finally getting somewhere, don't think you can just let go, let everything fall apart! You have to earn the respect you receive. (Chang, Eileen, 2007, 291)

Nie Chuanqing's future is also ruined by his family belief that children should obey the rules imposed by their parents. The rigid education that his father imposed on him, without realizing that it didn't fit his personality, brings him on the verge of madness, and almost kills Yan Danzhu.

In the end, men are subjects to the same feeling of isolation. They give up fighting for their needs when they realize that they are governed from outside and cannot change what has been so for generations.

When Nie Chuanqing hears their parents deciding his future, he feels helpless and is forced to accept his destiny.

... He heard his father, speaking to his stepmother in the next room.

... "It looks like we should find him a wife."

Chuanqing's tears ran, and his mouth twitched, as if he wanted to laugh.

But he couldn't stir a muscle; it felt as if a shell of ice had frozen across his face. His body was encased in ice too...

He couldn't escape. (Chang, Eileen, 2007, 108)

Tong Zhenbao, on the other side, after a fight with his wife, when he almost kills her, realizes that he cannot escape his fate, and returns to being the same good man, whom everyone wanted to see.

The next day, Zhenbao rose and reformed his ways. He made a fresh start and went back to being a good man. (Chang, Eileen, 2007, 312)

The writer's message is thus, clearly underlined, as she makes her male characters go through the same inner pain that the female characters go. The society needs to modernize itself not only on the outside, but also on the inside. It needs to undergo several cultural changes so that the individual gets more respect and understanding for his needs.

2.7. Language

After Zhang's parents decided to divorce, in 1930 and her mother left the country with her aunt, Zhang was left with her opium addict father. He cherished the old, traditional education and forced both Zhang and her brother, to assimilate the classical Confucian books.⁷ The young girl struggled to please

⁷ The Confucian Classics are a set of canonical books which are attributed to the philosopher Confucius (Kong zi). They consist in the Five Classics (Wu jing) and Four Books (Si shu), the first being compiled by Confucius himself. The *Wujing* "Five Canonical Works", include the *YIJING* "Book of Changes", the *SHANGSHU* (also known as *Shujing*) "Book of Documents", the *SHIJING* (or *Maoshi*) "Book of Poetry", the *LIII* "Records of Rites" and the *CHUNQIU* "Spring and Autumn Annals", and the *Sishu* "Four Books", include the teachings of the four philosophers Kongzi 孔子 (the *LUNYU* "Confucian Analects"), his disciple ZENG SHEN (the *DAXUE* "Great Learning"), KONG LI, a grandson of Confucius (the *ZHONGYONG* "Doctrine of the Mean"), and the book *MENGZI* which includes the teachings of the philosopher Meng Ke. www.chinaknowledge.de/Literature/Terms/classics.html (accessed at 21/01.20120)

her father, but she apparently did not fulfill her father's expectations, and was subject to severe punishment and indoor seclusion. On the other side, once her mother returned to mainland, she tried to educate her daughter in the modern Western style, and familiarized her with painting, piano and English.

From this bilingual education, Zhang was left with a double perspective: that of classical Chinese literature, and that of the modern Western one. Her literary style is marked by a refined, sophisticated and poetic language, which she inherited from the mainland literature and used it in portraying her characters and life during times of change, but at the same time she borrowed the modern Western literature freedom of expression and focus on the individual.

Zhang's intention of suggesting the persistence of old China with her cultural values and morals of society, despite its desire to embrace the modern lifestyle, has been well appreciated by literary critics. C. T. Hsia, remarked the strong influence the novel *Dream of the Red Chamber* had on her style. The Chinese critic spoke of the *intimate buidoir realism* which is to be seen in her descriptions of physical details:

Nothing like this has happened in Chinese fiction since the great novel *Dream of the Red Chamber*... But in contrast to the world of stable moral standards and feminine fashions of the latter novel, Zhang deals with a society in transition, where the only constants are the egoism in every bosom and the complementary flicker of love and compassion. (Hsia, C. T., 1961, 396)

Many passages in her short stories speak about a world in transition, where the new intrudes the old and gives rise to an environment which prevents the characters of being genuine, just because they do not fit in neither of the two worlds.

In *Sealed off* Wu Cuiyuan is unhappy living with her parents who try to pretend being a good modern family.

All the people in her family were good people. They took baths every day; they read the newspaper every day. When they turned on the radio, they never listened to local folk opera, comic opera, that sort of thing, just symphonies by Beethoven or Wagner; they didn't understand what they were listening to, but they listened anyway. In this world, there are more good people than real people... Cuiyuan wasn't very happy. (Chang, Eileen, 2007, 241)

Ge Weilong in *Aloeswood Ashes* is surprised to see that her aunt's house looks like "an ancient imperial tomb", although the owner was a highly modern fashionable woman. The short, physical description of the house is a privilege for the writer to make some historical references.

Weilong felt like one of those young students in Pu Songling's old ghost stories, the kind who goes up a mountain to see a relative and then, on the homeward journey, looks back at the mansion and finds it has become a grave mound. If the white Liang mansion had turned into a tomb, it wouldn't have surprised her much. She could see that her aunt was a woman of great ability, and had held back the wheel of history. She had preserved, in her own small world, the opulent lifestyle of the late Qing dynasty. Behind her own doors, she was a little Empress Cixi. (Chang, Eileen, 2007, 23)

The China that Zhang tries to portray in her short stories is still a traditional one in its basic aspects like education and way of seeing life, and modernity does not manage to change it fundamentally. It only offers an alternative, which is seen just as a more fashionable way of living.

The opening scene in *Love in a Fallen City* is very suggestive in this aspect. The *huqin* music played by old Mister Zhang, while all the family is gathered in the saloon, as well as the unexpected visit which a relative pays in the evening, seen by all of them as a bad omen, create the picture of a family deeply rooted in tradition. The importance of family relationships despite the changing times is clearly underlined by one of the members of Bai family, in his attempt to get rid of Liusu and send her off to the family of her deceased husband.

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! The tree may be a thousand feet tall, but the leaves fall back to the roots. (Chang, Eileen, 2007, 113)

The society that Zhang depicts in her short stories is still one of family clans, of men taking concubines, of amahs being scolded and even beaten by their masters and of women still binding their feet. Still we find out that modernity manages to intrude and introduce opium as source of relaxation, parties to facilitate men-woman communication, changes women's taste for fashion and allows women to leave house and have contact with outside world.

Zhang shows great ability to be realistic in her descriptions, to break the barrier of fiction and present a genuine world which fascinates the reader precisely through its simplicity.

3. Conclusions

Zhang Ailing was influenced in her short stories by the old, classical literature, especially by the most referential Qing novel, *Dream of the Red Chamber*. Still, she found her inspiration also in the romantic style of the New Literature and that of Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies movement. All of these

sources helped her create a unique style, which is governed by an anti romantic vision of reality, subjective history and framed narrative.

The most striking difference between her style and that of Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies, defined also as Old School, resides in the choice of plot, which, in the case of the latter, consists in love affairs which end due to the interference of villains or of outside unpredicted situations. Zhang's love affairs end only because of the characters inability to overpass the society or family's constraints and their lack of power to accept their own weaknesses.

From the classical Dream of the Red Chamber, Zhang takes the realism of descriptions as well as the poetic language of her imagery. The writer makes use of detailed descriptions to render either the interior of a house, the activity on a street or the flow of conscience of a character. The words she uses in order to create an image remind the reader of the classical Chinese poetry.

Her anti romantic vision of society and distrust in modern civilization, bring Zhang closer to the modern writers of the May 4th literary movement. The tragic fate of her male and female characters, are good examples to prove that, though the society went through a process of modernization, it still remains faithful to the old morals.

Zhang's choice of presenting life as it is, of choosing common people to stand as main characters, differentiate her from the writers of the thirties and forties, who present heroic figures which stand as examples of the political propaganda.

At the same time she also detaches from the group of New Sensationists, considered by some critics as the pioneers of modernism in China. Their literature set the accent on the life of the city as well as the inner self of the characters. Still their writings are mainly experimental and lack a well defined style and writing techniques. Zhang's vision is more humanitarian and shows a great compassion for the individual's weaknesses.

Zhang's style is unique precisely through her ability to present the life of the city in a sensual, poetic way and constantly point out the conflict between the modern and the traditional. Her ability to use the old literary techniques and give them new forms of expression, gives her short stories value and consolidates her position as one of the best representatives of modernism in China.

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