

# Wreckage, War, Woman. Fragments of a Female Self in Zhang Ailing's *Love in a Fallen City* (倾城之恋)

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**Abstract** This article examines wreckage and war as key elements in Zhang Ailing's novella *Qing cheng zhi lian* 倾城之恋 (Love in a Fallen City) exploring the strategies used by the female protagonist to engage on a *nüxing* 女性 'feminist'-oriented spatial quest for independence in a male-centered world. Analysed from a feminist perspective, these strategies emerge as potentially empowering and based on the idea of conflict/conquest while dealing with man and romance, but they are also constantly threatened by the instability of history and by the lack of any true agency and gender-specific space for women in the 1940s Chinese society and culture. By analysing the floating/stability dichotomy and the spatial configurations of Shanghai and Hong Kong as described in the novella, the author argues Zhang Ailing's depiction of Chinese women while dealing with history, society and the quest for self-affirmation is left in-between wreckage and survival, oppression and feminism, revealing her eccentric otherness as a woman and as a writer with respect to socially committed literature.

**Keywords** Zhang Ailing. Love in a Fallen City. Wreckage. War. Feminist spatial quest.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. An Ambivalent Form of Desolation. – 2 From Wreckage to Wreckage. – 3 Conflict and Conquest. Bai Liusu and Her 'War' for Life. – 4 Empty Fragments Floating. Urban Spaces and the Unconnectedness of Woman. – 5 Conclusions. A (Post) Modern View on History.



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## 1 Introduction. An Ambivalent Form of Desolation

Wreckage and war were the ontological background of all forms of literary creations for Chinese writers of the 1940s. On the one hand, the Sino-Japanese conflict (1937-45) “simply deprived Chinese people of any marginal space or any symbolic choice granting them a viable historical way out” (Dai, Meng 1989b, 203); on the other hand, the actual physical space of the nation came to be organized along “a three-spaced pattern configuration”(204): the Nationalist-controlled areas, the liberated areas and the areas occupied by Japan. This configuration had a profound impact on writers and on their literary creations; in particular, as far as women writers were concerned, while in Nationalist-controlled areas and Communist-liberated areas alike, women authors were forced into neutralizing any potentially gender-specific political standpoint they might have – what we may refer to as a *nüxing* 女性 standpoint<sup>1</sup> – because of the emergence of the all-encompassing ‘manly’ celebration of national resistance against the foreign invaders, women authors working in the territories occupied by Japan paradoxically managed to find a possible woman-centred space of self-expression in “the accidental crevices generated by the language and culture of aggression” (Dai, Meng 1989b, 219). In other words, although they literally lived in prison, somehow these women authors found a way to exert a form of suffocated agency among the splinters of the Chinese nation. Yet, being the 1940s characterized by heightened precariousness and being the Chinese nation reduced to a wrecking space itself, this construction of women’s authorial voice and of a possible *nüxing* self inevitably came to be inscribed “in the debris of history” (Yan 2006),<sup>2</sup> often emerging as a fragmented female self rather than as a whole.

This was particularly true for Zhang Ailing (Eileen Chang), a woman writer whose overt lack of interest in political concerns condemned her writing to oblivion for thirty years in mainland China

<sup>1</sup> My reference here is to Dai and Meng’s use of the term *nüxing* 女性 as “the rejected and the different”, a politically conscious subject whose critique and subversive analysis on social, historical and cultural constraints against women can emerge as “divergent and even in opposition to” the male modern nation as a group in China from the late-Qing era to 1949 (Dai, Meng 1989a, 29). This non-essentialistic definition of *nüxing* represents a feminist political standpoint echoing a Western poststructuralist definition of ‘woman’ as “hors scène, hors représentation, hors jeu, hors je” and as somebody whose history has to be stopped “pour se laisser prescrire par celle d’un autre: celle de l’homme-père”. It is precisely by reinventing herself “pour éviter le vide” and by creating a “passage entre”, that is through the crevices of culture, matter and history, that ‘woman’ can re-emerge to the surface and finally become a woman-subject (Irigaray 1974, 21, 47, 283, 439 respectively). Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are by the Author.

<sup>2</sup> Yan’s definition is inspired by her reading and analysis of Walter Benjamin’s work on modern history.

(but not in Taiwan)<sup>3</sup> as the creation of a 'bourgeois' individual. Indeed, "an unapologetic individualism" (Wang 2012, 565) was the most distinctive feature of Zhang's writing, one that seemed to confine her work to a tepid reception also in the West outside the circle of Chinese literature scholars, despite early praise by literary critic C.T. Hsia<sup>4</sup> and the late 1990s-early 2000s worldwide re-discovery of her work following two film adaptations of two homonymous novellas by Zhang (*Red Rose, White Rose* and *Lust, Caution*, directed by Stanley Kwan and Ang Lee respectively in 1994 and 2007).<sup>5</sup> Besides, though she has often been praised as a literary genius<sup>6</sup> and compared to influential Western writers - Henry James, Jane Austen and, quite recently, Alice Munro,<sup>7</sup> to name just a few - Zhang's solitary isolationism sometimes has been seen by Western or Western-oriented critics and scholars (especially feminist ones) with suspicion. According to Yan Haiping, for example, her apolitical stories of oppressed, seemingly non-triumphant women, are mere products of "an ontological desolation", ultimately resulting in "human bankruptcy" (Yan 2006, 153). In her book analyzing Chinese women writers of the modern era from a feminist perspective, Yan Haiping completely dismisses Zhang Ailing, implying her writing wasn't concerned with women's empowerment - let alone liberation - at all, a view shared by Chinese scholar Wang Tian in her comparison between Zhang Ailing's and Virginia Woolf's visions on life and women (Wang 2014, 35-7). No doubt, trying to analyze Zhang Ailing from a liberating and empowering perspective for women would prove disappointing, given

**3** For a discussion on the popularity of Zhang's writings in Taiwan and her influence on Taiwanese *feminine* writers of the 1970s and the 1980s in Taiwan, see Chang 1993, 215-37.

**4** "Eileen Chang is not only the best and most important writer in Chinese today; her short stories alone invite valid comparisons with, and in some respect superiority over, the work of serious modern women writers in English: Katherine Mansfield, Katherine Anne Porter, Eudora Welty, and Carson McCullers" (Hsia 1961, 389). As Liu Zai-fu acknowledges, C.T. Hsia "helps Chinese and foreign readers recognize her as a literary genius" (Liu 2009).

**5** For additional information on the sudden growing interest for Chang's writing in the West following the film adaptations of her short stories and a revival of popularity towards her work in mainland China, as opposed to the constant interest shown in Hong Kong and Taiwan, see Kam 2012a, 2-3. For a discussion on how literary criticism has changed from the 1980s onwards in mainland China, see also Liu 2009. Karen S. Kingsbury, one of the most important translators of Zhang's work in English, also mentions the 'Chang craze' spreading in Taiwan, Hong Kong and mainland China. See Kingsbury 2007, xiv.

**6** After Zhang Ailing's death in 1995, "a veritable mystique has been built around her" in all Chinese-speaking countries, including mainland China, where critics suddenly changed their attitude towards her writing (Lee 1999, 267).

**7** Scholar Wang Yuanfei (2004) has devoted her entire MA thesis to the comparison between the two authors.

the pessimistic tone of her writings:<sup>8</sup> the optimistic vision of many May Fourth-inspired writers was replaced in her work by a profound pessimistic view on the human soul – man's and woman's alike. She had no faith at all in the possibility to change one's own destiny, because for her human beings (and women in particular) were just mean creatures paralyzed inside the *nèi* 内 'innerness' of their petty little lives, with no *wài* 外 'outerness' to run to.<sup>9</sup> This is why analyzing Zhang Ailing's stories from a Euro-American-centred feminist perspective can be frustrating: her pitiless description of women's weakness and of their material drive, ultimately resulting in no real agency for any of them, inevitably makes the author look irritating to our eyes. Yet denying Zhang's pessimism – with no independence whatsoever granted to women – would not simply mean misinterpreting her writing but also ignore the pain hidden in it. If *huāngliáng* 荒涼 'desolation' was what ultimately prevailed in her writing – as she herself frankly admitted (Chang [1944] 2007a, 1) – it is because she wanted to depict neither heroines nor exceptional beings, but mediocre pawns crushed by destiny.

Yet, her desolation was an ambivalent one. Despite the fact that she did not share the main concerns of Chinese women intellectuals of her time, displaying no belief in woman's ability to improve her destiny, this did not necessarily mean she couldn't see reality as suffocating and oppressive for Chinese women. On the contrary, she did indeed analyze the ways in which woman's displacement within Chinese family and society could reveal her daily struggle for survival, albeit surrounded by a halo of desolation. Yan Haiping's (2006) negative evaluation on Zhang Ailing as a 'non-feminist' writer doesn't

<sup>8</sup> Hsia defines Zhang Ailing as "a profound pessimist" (Hsia 1961, 414).

<sup>9</sup> Before the twentieth century, the spatial and ideological organization of patriarchal society in China had always been based on the *nèi* 内/*wài* 外 dichotomy. This imposed a strict separation on the male and female genders in terms of accessibility and movement within and without a specific segment of space: whereas men were endowed with the possibility of moving freely in the vast public (social, political *and* literary) arena of *wài* 'outerness', implying the ideas of power, authority and literary talent as inherently 'male' and visible, women were exclusively confined to the most secret part of the family mansion, the so called *guīfáng* 闺房 'lady's chambers', or 'inner chambers', hidden from sight and constituting *nèi* 'innerness', implying the ideas of domesticity, obedience and disappearance as inherently 'female' and crucial to the functioning of the patriarchal structure of traditional Chinese society. This meant that space was experienced by woman as associated to confinement, self-restraint (including chastity) as her sole virtue and self-effacement as her ideal (or desired) aspiration. Although this space of innerness was used by generations of women as a potential form of empowerment within a patriarchal system denying them any authority in the *wài* arena, its ontological perimeter inevitably coincided with the semantics of prison, as there was no other alternative offered to them, no outerness to aspire to. This lack of any outer space implied that woman merely functioned as a tool within the family order, the very naming of her subjectivity in the Chinese language reduced to a function and a rigid formalized set of correct behaviours (Dai, Meng 1989a, 2-3).

take into account a possible Chinese configuration of feminism as a denunciation of the patriarchal oppression of women within the man-woman transaction, rather than as a search for woman's empowerment at all costs. Actually, in her essay *Tan nüren* 谈女人 (On Women), Zhang Ailing explicitly denounced women's inferior status as caused by men and by socio-cultural circumstances:

Because of their lack of physical strength, since remote ages, women have always been subjugated and dominated by men's control and they have adapted to these circumstances, cultivating the so-called "wifely attitude". [...] If women's weakness is entirely the result of their circumstances, then why is it that modern-times women, who have received the same college education of their male counterparts, often disappoint others by displaying hypersensitive and hot-headed temperaments similar to their grandmothers'? Certainly, century-old habits can't be discarded in just one day; one only needs to wait for the right time to change them... (Zhang 2003e, 61)

Not only does Zhang Ailing complain about women's oppression as caused by men, but she also points out women themselves are often not strong enough to change their fate, as the 'lethargy' of die-hard habits takes hold of them completely. Although Yan assumes feminism is some sort of monolithic universal regardless of any specific historical and ethnical context within a given space-time frame, dismissing Zhang Ailing's attempt at defining (and denouncing) woman's constraints within the enclosure of domesticity simply as anti-feminist tokens of desolation implies we should see this attempt as exclusively essentialist, and thus irrelevant from a supposedly 'authentic' feminist standpoint.

No doubt Zhang Ailing is highly problematic as a woman writer, as she doesn't fit into any clear-cut definition of either what a 'feminist' woman author (or the female characters she creates) should be - fully independent - or what a post-May Fourth Chinese intellectual is supposed to be - leftist. Also, she clearly wished to entlicate herself both from the May Fourth-generated *nüxing* signifier and from the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)-oriented *funü* 妇女 signifier<sup>10</sup> by deliberately using the term *nüren* 女人, namely in *Tan nüren*,

<sup>10</sup> During the 1930s, there was a gradual shift from *nüxing* to *funü* as the main signifier referring to 'woman', especially in leftist mainstream literature; this shift was deemed by (male) intellectuals as necessary in order to replace a supposedly 'individualistic' and 'bourgeois' view on woman with a 'collective' one, directly associated to the idea of revolution. Originally signaling the "female member of the patrilineal family", *funü* was deliberately used as a way to de-gender women's literature and eventually turning it into a genderless space, where a generic leftist standpoint would high-

which makes her ambivalence even stronger. The difference in meaning among these signifiers and Zhang's deliberate use of *nüren* was connected to the historical changes China had been going through, especially during the Japanese invasion and in the occupied areas. The new form of precariousness generated by foreign aggression ushered both men and women living in these areas into an age of disillusionment, confused as it was with pain, death and a vague hope of victory (Dai, Meng 1989b, 219). This shattering of all beliefs soon became the only certainty for women writers living in the areas controlled by Japan: they found themselves living in a world where no actual *nüxing* choice seemed possible; consequently, they deliberately wrote about "the lack of any alternative for themselves, and their realization of the impossibility of evading from this situation gave rise to a form of writing characterized by sober, sanguine and lucid self-awareness" (Dai, Meng 1989b, 220). This prison-like ideological standpoint turned women writers' spatial quest from the *nüxing* rebelliousness of the 1920s-1930s into fierce "straightforwardness and ruthlessness" (Dai, Meng 1989b, 221), a quest which, far from displaying mere passivity, showed a true

awareness of society's chauvinistic core [...] [which] wasn't limited to the wish of conveying the resentment and hate they felt about how much they were oppressed, toyed with or reduced to mere commodities. They moved away from this "weak" phase [...] so as to become powerful and wise by taking their rightful position in a man's world as 女人 [*nüren*]. This kind of woman does not cast man aside, but understands him, her own self [...] and the specific details of the love strategies required in the man-woman relationship. (Dai, Meng 1989b, 222)

While for example Ding Ling's heroines of the late 1920s asked for "fair treatment from a sexist society", the women characters created by 1940s women writers imprisoned in the areas occupied by Japan

since they knew this fair treatment was impossible, they thought it better to stand upwards, face the truth and behave accordingly; of course they *had to* behave like 女人 [*nüren*], as they couldn't use other people to fill in the semantic void they had to bear and acknowledge for themselves. (Dai, Meng 1989b, 223)

In other words, writers like Zhang Ailing created female characters who deliberately chose to behave like female versions of men, that is

light the rebirth of the nation and the triumph of the CCP and of the masses together (Dai, Meng 1989a, 28).

as *nüren*, because it was the only strategy left they had to survive in a world ravaged by history where all meaning seemed lost, including what 'woman' and her spatial quest might mean. Yet, if we take Tani Barlow's definition of *nüxing* as a woman displaying "an organic will" of her own (Barlow 2004, 140) despite the world constantly erasing her specificity, we can easily see how the shrewd *nüren* Bai Liusu, the protagonist of Zhang Ailing's story *Qing cheng zhi lian* 倾城之恋 (Love in a Fallen City), shares many traits with Chinese heroines created by the 1920s women writers in her struggle for self-awareness. Furthermore, being Bai Liusu's spatial quest also an indirect questioning of woman's role in Chinese society, *Qing cheng zhi lian* can indeed be interpreted as a *feminist* story from a distinctly Chinese perspective, more specifically from a late-Qing elite woman's perspective and from an author who chose to focus on the stifling limitations the *nei* still caused to women in the 1940s despite social changes, paradoxically in the very year - 1943 - China's unequal treaties were abrogated and the country was internationally granted a "civilized status" despite being invaded by Japan (Duara 2003, 96).

Besides, Zhang Ailing's gender-specific quest, unlike that of many Chinese women writers of the 1930s, wasn't related to "the master narratives of political revolution or salvation" at all, as she chose to explore the "contractual" nature of all human interactions in general focusing on feminine sorrow in particular (Chow 1993, 94-5), thus on what most literary critics and writers considered to be 'individual' matters at the time.<sup>11</sup> In many ways, it was precisely in professing a deliberate 'unapologetic individualism' that Zhang revealed her own otherness as a woman and as a writer: in a time when the majority of authors, both female and male *as well as* both communists and nationalists in the Nationalist-controlled areas and the Communist-

**11** The *Zhongguo zuoyi zuojia lianmeng* 中国左翼作家联盟 'League of the Left-Wing Writers', which was founded in 1930, changed literature's horizon dramatically, its new focus being the *da zhong zhi shen* 大众之神 'spirit of the masses'. Soon, all discourse came to be structured around a new dichotomy, opposing *xiaowo* 小我 'the small I' to *dawo* 大我 'the big I', the 'individual' to the 'collective', urban intellectuals to the working class/peasantry, and in doing literature "nearly no one could avoid repressing the former as negligible and highlighting the latter as important" (Dai, Meng 1989b, 102). This dichotomy between 'individual' and 'collective' ended up drowning any possible gender-specific focus, so the "ideological shield" (106) that *nüxing* was granted during the May-Fourth period as a signifier of rebellion towards the rule of the father "once again was gradually neutralized by the new ideology created by the League of the Left-wing writers" (108). Consequently, the female gender was granted room *inside* the space politics of national literature only if the woman writer erased her specificity, as many women authors of the 1930s chose to do. Otherwise, she would be forced "outside the father and son's order; she was entitled to criticize but not to overthrow this power structure [so], pushed to the margins of the age [...], she could only lie low under the shadow of the great collective deity and fall behind its radiance, functioning as the difference positioned outside the relational pattern between the great masses and the rule of the father" (109).

controlled areas alike, felt compelled to profess an optimistic drive towards progress and modernity, thus finding purpose in political activism and in politicized literature despite the Japanese invasion (and also because most of them operated *outside* the Japanese-controlled areas), isolationism and detachment came to symbolize a far more troubling form of otherness, because it was at odds with anything else, offering no solution to life's contradictions and sufferings but laying them bare for everyone to see. Like Lu Xun, Zhang chose to focus her attention on the 'disease' and decline of late Qing-generated Chinese society and of the urban elite in particular<sup>12</sup> while simultaneously transcending history depicting "the unhealthy collective unconscious of the Chinese" (Liu 2009).<sup>13</sup> Unlike Lu Xun, though, Zhang Ailing found no consolation nor any reform-driven mission in literature.<sup>14</sup> Her primary concern in describing the decline of late-Qing middle class values stemmed from her cold acknowledgement of history being on the verge of collapse while she was constantly struggling against the precariousness of life in mid 1930s-late 1940s China. The war with Japan was at the very core of Chinese people's (and writers') existence, but although everyday life was bleak and ravaged, this "time being wrecked" (Zhang cited in Yan 2006, 2) state of mind paradoxically granted her the lucidity to dissect human nature "with an artist's compassionate detachment" (Kingsbury 2007, xiii). As an echo of what was going on in the country as a whole, she dealt with family matters as she was dealing with war matters themselves, depicting a universe characterized by war on all fronts. If 'human bankruptcy' was what ultimately prevailed in most of her writings, as Yan (2006) explicitly states, it was not because Zhang reveled in the desolation and wreckage history was imposing on Chinese people in general and on late Qing-born elite members in particular, but because she wanted to denounce that same bankruptcy as the most poignant element emerging from the ruins of society, family, people, and women too.

**12** C.T. Hsia speaks about her work as dealing with "a society in transition [...]" and with "the persistence of the past in the present, the continuity of Chinese modes of behaviour in apparently changing material circumstances" and displaying "a strong historical awareness" (Hsia 1961, 396).

**13** Though Liu gives this definition on the collective unconscious only referring to Lu Xun's writings, I believe Chang's ability to create unpassionate portrayals of Chinese men and women as mean at heart makes her own writing a further example of this definition.

**14** Although Lu Xun himself lost his 'faith' in the reform-driven mission of literature in the late 1920s.



## 2 From Wreckage to Wreckage

Zhang Ailing's own life was a constant struggle to emerge and survive from wreckage to wreckage: her family belonged to the once powerful late Qing aristocracy (Yu 2008, 3-4)<sup>15</sup> whose privileged status had crumbled to dust because of China's unstoppable drive towards modernity. When Zhang Ailing was born in 1920 Shanghai, under the child name of Xiao Ying (Yu 2008, 5), there was little left of the glorious past of both her family and of the country as a whole; this preliminary family wreckage echoing national disintegration soon resulted in a violent tension between decadent nostalgia for tradition and thirst for cosmopolitanism, symbolized by her parents' conflicting behaviours. While her refined but reactionary father Zhang Yanzhong devoted his time to debauchery, smoking opium and taking a concubine to live with him, thus embodying all negative aspects of Chinese tradition, by contrast, her liberated *nǚxing* mother Huang Yifan (herself coming from a distinguished family) preferred Western culture and independence, eventually discarding family life from 1924 to 1928 to continue her studies in Europe and temporarily leave the immobility and oppression of Chinese society behind (Yu 2008, 5-11).<sup>16</sup> This duality<sup>17</sup> left its mark on the daughter too, born under the Chinese name of Zhang Ying but later enrolled to the Virgin Mary Missionary School for Girls by her mother under the English name of Eileen Chang, a glamorous name her mother started using in Chinese as well, translating it directly from English (Yu 2008, 14-15). As a child, the girl already experienced life as wreckage through this parental conflict, with her father and mother both consumed by a self-absorbed quest which eventually ravaged familial and personal survival alike. When her mother returned from her travel abroad in 1928 (Yu 2008, 12),<sup>18</sup> living together proved impossible for the couple and they divorced in 1930: again life was shattered to pieces for Ailing and everything had to be built again out of the debris of her parents' relationship. There was no clear-cut solution to this split-

**15** Zhang Ailing's paternal grandfather, Zhang Peilun, had married prominent Qing diplomat Li Hongzhang's daughter; consequently, he enjoyed a prestigious career as a government officer. Zhang Ailing's great-grandfather Li Hongzhang "was known to Westerners as the Superintendent of Trade - the chief architect of foreign policy in the late Qing. He was such a highly regarded figure that Queen Victoria made him a Knight of Grand Cross of the Royal Victorian Order" (Kam 2012a, 3).

**16** An authentic rebellious *nǚxing*, Huang Yifan hated the fact that marriage had deprived her of the possibility of cultivating knowledge at a very young age only to bear and rear children, so she decided to leave her family behind for a while.

**17** Yu Qing refers to Zhang Yanzhong and Huang Yifan as "two worlds apart, completely incompatible to one another, like fire and water" (Yu 2008, 41).

**18** The family moved back to Shanghai after Zhang Yanzhong had lost a prestigious government-related post in Tianjin.

ting of life in two, no simple choosing between “father’s dark, smoky lair; mother’s bright, modern apartment”(Kingsbury 2007, xi) as both parents seemed oblivious of their two children (Yu 2008, 17-18).<sup>19</sup> At first Ailing had no choice but to live with her father, as the parents established he would be the only one entitled to raise the children, while the mother would continue providing for their education (although, finally free from marriage, she would soon leave for Europe one more time). Ailing’s life was once again split in-between her father’s relapse into the dusky cloud of self-destruction and the bright light of education she could enjoy at school (Yu 2008, 18-19). Despite being encouraged to write by her father (Yu 2008, 29), as a young teenager Ailing managed to cultivate her own knowledge only by locking herself up in her room, without gaining any practical knowledge of the outside world. The war with Japan hadn’t broken out yet, but young Ailing already lived as a *neixiang* 内向 ‘introvert’ prisoner, physically and psychologically self-confined to the domesticity of *nei* and strongly influenced by the indolent lethargic atmosphere of the house, devoting her time to studying not to see decay and human bankruptcy taking hold of her father, eventually becoming oblivious of her own decay too. She spent so much time in her room that she “completely forgot the way to the front door of the house”, not even knowing “where the doorbell was” (Yu 2008, 34) but dreaming of going to England once graduated from school (Yu 2008, 38). When her mother came back from her second trip to Europe, in 1936, not only did Ailing find the strength to go to see her, expressing her wish to study abroad, but she also announced her decision to her father and his new wife, both of whom reacted very badly (Yu 2008, 41). When in 1937 Ailing was beaten up by her father and stepmother for speaking up against their opium addiction (Yu 2008, 41-4), everything shattered to pieces again: locked up in her room for six months as a punishment for ‘unfilial behaviour’ and suffering from dysentery-induced hallucinations, at the age of sixteen Ailing nearly died of lack of food and medicines but finally managed to escape from her prison at night, finding momentary shelter in her mother (Yu 2008, 43-5).<sup>20</sup> But wreckage reared its ugly head once more: the Japanese invasion of Shanghai had already begun, and despite being free from her father’s decay, her personal survival was still threatened. Had the war been confined to China only, Ailing would have managed to study English literature in the UK, but she was forced to settle for the

**19** During this period, Zhang Yanzhong dilapidated all the money he had been left by his own family and by Huang Yifan’s dowry, thus pushing the marriage to its final wreck. The couple had two children, Ailing and her little brother Zhang Zijing.

**20** Ailing recounted her house imprisonment in an article written in English for the *Damei wanbao* 大美晚报 (Evening Post).

University of Hong Kong instead, hoping to build life anew there. This experience too was interrupted by yet another Japanese invasion on 8 December 1941, this time in the British colony itself (Yu 2008, 57). Fleeing from wreckage again, Ailing returned to occupied Shanghai, where she enjoyed a brilliant but brief career as a writer. She managed to publish a collection of stories in 1945, finally revisioned with the unpretentious title of *Chuanqi* 傳奇 in 1947, and had an immense success, though history constantly threatened her life until the ultimate wreckage came: when the CCP took hold of the country in 1949, being overtly apolitical and previously married to a man publicly denounced as traitor,<sup>21</sup> Zhang Ailing was forced to leave Shanghai for Hong Kong first, then for the USA, where she arrived in 1952 never to set foot on Chinese land again (Yu 2008, 170). Her success had been stunning but meteoric and it was soon destroyed, just like any other part of her life had been: once in the USA, Zhang Ailing tried to build up her career again out of the debris of her past, salvaging fragments of existence re-writing her stories and her own self,<sup>22</sup> but ultimately achieved only oblivion. She still tried to survive and create her own self out of the multiplied wreckage of her life caught in-between spaces – darkness and light, ruins and survival, desolation and reaffirmation of the self – in a constant echo of the family conflict between the father's Chinese dim lair and the mother's European bright apartment.

Wreckage is also an important element in the stories included in the *Chuanqi* collection, the most celebrated work by Zhang Ailing. These novellas depict life in Shanghai and Hong Kong and focus on characters “defined against [...] a culture in decadence” (Hsia 1961, 397), thus, like Zhang herself, living among the ruins of civilization but hoping to rise from its ashes. All her female characters seem to revolve around a vital question: can woman salvage some possible fragments of identity in a world constantly on the verge of collapse, or collapsed already? The novella *Qing cheng zhi lian*, in particular, explicitly associates the idea of wreckage to the presence of war,

**21** Her husband Hu Lancheng 胡兰成, critic and editor in chief of the *Zhonghua ribao* 中华日报 (China Daily) and of the *Nanhua ribao* 南华日报 (Southern China Daily), had served as deputy director of the cultural propaganda department in the puppet government of the Reorganized nationalist regime run by collaborationist Wang Jingwei 汪精卫 and established by the Japanese between 1940 and 1945. As the Japanese officialy surrendered on 25 August 1945, Hu Lancheng escaped first to Japan, then went to Taiwan, where he was offered a post as university professor at the Taiwan Institute of Chinese Culture. The marriage between Hu and Zhang Ailing, though very brief (it only lasted from 1944 to 1947) and constantly kept secret for political reasons, was soon discovered by comrade Xia Yan 夏衍, responsible for the CCP cultural work in Shanghai. This permanently damaged Zhang Ailing's career (Yu 2008, 137, 145, 152, 154, 163).

**22** Her final, posthumous work *Xiao Tuanyuan* 小团员 (Little Reunions), is a re-enacting of her own existence and writing combining them in a fragmented whole.

whose main setting is Hong Kong before and during the Japanese attack of 8 December 1941, that same attack that had forced Zhang Ailing to flee the city and its university and go back to occupied Shanghai. Wreckage and war are at the core of this novella, where Hong Kong as a city of ruins collapses all the while Bai Liusu, the female protagonist who left Shanghai in search for stability, tries to cling on to a fragment of life out of the debris of history: all of a sudden, the outside world steps inside narration, apparently wrecking the protagonist's life. But it is precisely in the debris of the city itself and within the wreckage of history that Bai Liusu eventually manages to find a crevice back into her life and hold on to a self-evident fragment of a *nüxing* self in the dichotomy of existence, in-between Shanghai and Hong Kong, China and the West, semi-colonial spaces and colonial ones, stale tradition and glittering modernity, oppression and escape – though this fragmented salvaging of the woman-self may prove to be just an illusion.

Bai Liusu herself is a woman wrecked by destiny when the story starts: she's a 28-year-old divorcee forced to live with her brother's family and with no money of her own – her brother squandered all her dowry after she moved back with her relatives. Her position within the Bai household is determined by her decision to leave a violent husband, his actions giving her enough ground to file for divorce. The rights granted to women by the Guomindang (GMD) Civil Code in terms of divorce were a recent innovation in China,<sup>23</sup> yet these legal changes did not necessarily give any real freedom to women, as their fate was still chained to their family's and to centuries-old oppressive traditions. Zhang explicitly states so through a male family member, Third Master, whose words embody the atavic oppression still stunting Chinese women's growth as individuals in the 1940s:

The law is one thing today and another thing tomorrow. What I'm talking about is the traditional ethics, the three rules and the five constant virtues of Confucianism, and these will never change! Your life belongs to the family, and when you die, your ghost too will belong to the family. (Zhang [1943] 2009, 114)

The only freedom Bai Liusu seems to enjoy is the ability to ferociously snap back at her relatives whenever they verbally attack her. Besides, though the GMD reforms in matters of divorce may well have originated from the need to modernize the family, as a form of com-

**23** “The new GMD Civil Code (1929-30) – on the basis that all citizens were equal before the law – accorded women the same divorce rights as men, allowing them to initiate a divorce on ten different grounds (including bigamy, adultery, ill-treatment, incurable disease or mental illness)” (Bailey 2012, 92).

compensation for the government's deliberate destruction of the women's movement during the White Terror campaign of 1927-8 (Bailey 2012, 76-7), traditional elite people in decline were still prone to consider divorce as unsuitable for women and a divorcee family member as a burden, "a jinx" (Zhang [1943] 2009, 114), because divorce could only result in irresponsible disaster, that is in wrecking the foundations of family life and turning the divorcee woman into a wreck herself. After all, while apparently granting new rights to women in terms of marriage, divorce and inheritance, the GMD had simultaneously reinstated traditional feminine virtues through the New Life Movement of 1934-5. In other words, the personal wreckage Bai Liusu has to deal with echoes the wreckage of all Chinese women smashing against their lack of any actual agency within society and family while being granted new institutional rights.<sup>24</sup> Disillusioned, sour, yet not prone to passivity nor despair, Bai Liusu can only resort to sarcasm and anger to survive her family in a context more and more characterized by a war-like atmosphere. This cannot last for long, though: as a potentially modern urban woman fighting to escape from a traditional context, she needs a way out of her misery and will do anything she can to accomplish her task.

Ironically, being the microcosmos depicted by Zhang Ailing in her novella characterized by "semitraditional, semicolonial" (Wang 2012, 566) traits, education and manual labour cannot be considered as viable options for a woman; here we won't find any Nora defying and eventually fleeing social and family conventions because life is frozen, leaving the 'rebellious' woman "floating and unconnected" (Zhang [1943] 2009, 117)<sup>25</sup> to anything and anyone else: Bai Liusu cannot rely on economic independence in order to break free from her family ties. As relative Mrs. Xu suggests, "looking for a job is the wrong thing to do. But looking for a somebody, that's the right way to proceed" (Zhang [1943] 2009, 116). In order to defeat her family and win the war for her own survival, it is imperative for Bai Liusu to find a husband she can rely on.

What Zhang envisages here, though, is not the building of a possible romantic relationship: despite what the title may suggest, *Qing cheng zhi lian* is not a tale of love, but rather a reversal of love, just

<sup>24</sup> Not coincidentally, as Hershatter points out, although in 1936 "a draft constitution gave women the right to vote [...] this provision was not implemented until 1947" - exactly the same year when the *Chuanqi* collection was revised (Hershatter 2007, 94). This meant that Zhang was creating a possible *nüxing* struggle to obtain rights in family and society precisely in the same period in which real women were still being denied actual political rights.

<sup>25</sup> Here I opted for Karen Kingsbury's rendering of the second set of characters, *bu luo shi di* 不落地, which she translates as 'unconnected', though they may also suggest the idea of 'lack of fixity' and of 'leaving no trace behind' (Chang 2007b, 120).

as the whole collection of *Chuanqi* stories is a reversal of traditional Tang and Ming tales of the extraordinary.<sup>26</sup> Zhang explicitly declared in a famous essay “there are neither war nor revolution in my works” (Zhang [1944] 2003d, 16), yet *Qing cheng zhi lian* eventually proves to be a tale of war indeed, even before any actual bombing breaks into the palace of the story. As it happened in most literary creations by women authors imprisoned in the areas occupied by Japan, Bai Liusu and other female characters created by Zhang Ailing display

an unprecedented clear-headedness and awareness with respect to their literary predecessors. They knew how to assess their unfavourable situation, their position and value in society if compared to man's [...]; they knew they had to choose *whatever means to survive*. [...] Thus, Zhang Ailing's love stories are not about “love” at all; they describe the war between man and woman and their mutual warfare strategies. (Dai, Meng 1989b, 221-2; emphasis added)

For Bai Liusu, finding a new husband involves using elaborate tactics and schemes aimed at conquering a man and his assets, because this is deemed by social and cultural conventions as the sole means of survival for woman, as the only way out of a ravaged family situation and out of her ‘unconnected’ self.

### 3 Conflict and Conquest. Bai Liusu and Her ‘War’ for Life

Right from the start, Bai Liusu is highly aware of her anomalous position within the family as a divorcee woman, a status which can only cause conflict with the other household members, consequently generating a wish to escape on her part. In planning to do so, she also comes to understand the need for acting completely by herself: “She had no one of the family to turn to: she was on her own” (Zhang [1943] 2009, 120). Yet in a semi-traditional world where hierarchies of any kind are still important to achieve self-preservation, escape from conflict and independence from family ties for a woman can only come at a price, without involving any path to individual independence *per se*. Bai Liusu cannot look for a job to support herself, for she would lose her social status, nor can she use her own personal qual-

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<sup>26</sup> “The tradition of *chuanqi*, or ‘accounts of the extraordinary’, as a literary genre can be traced back to the Tang dynasty prose *chuanqi* as well as to the popular genre of Ming drama. In the Tang genre in particular, the accounts of extraordinary happenings often involve ghostly figures or legendary heroes and heroines. The Ming *chuanqi* drama deals, among other subjects, with historical romance” (Lee 1999, 288).

ities to her advantage, for she seems to believe she has none.<sup>27</sup> Sadly enough, she can only resort to marriage and consequently to reliance on a man to be fully independent. As explained by Wang Tian

In Zhang Ailing's works, women have no awareness whatsoever about their own personal value [...]; a woman whose economic safety did not come from relying on a man was considered to be worthless and eventually loathed and humiliated by the whole society. (Wang 2014, 36)

Having no value, no skills nor money of her own, Bai Liusu soon has to set off on a life journey whose destination is a man's fortune, in order to secure her place in a male-dominated world. This journey is both a physical and a metaphorical one, during which the break from family ties leads Bai Liusu to experience Hong Kong, war and victory over a man's fortunes in the process. All three aspects of her journey originate from her basic quest for a husband as the only way out of her conflict with family members. Her main concern being the desolation and pettiness hidden inside the human soul, the narrator makes it perfectly clear that Bai Liusu's quest has nothing to do with love but rather with self-preservation at all costs; this implies dismantling her previous configuration of life by creating a con-quest strategy and waging war against everything and everyone standing in her way:

She turned on the lamp, moved it towards the mirror and studied her own reflection: not bad, she wasn't that old yet. She had that kind of delicate figure that doesn't show age - her waist permanently thin, her breast still budding like a girl's. Her face, formerly as white as porcelain, now had turned similar to jade - a semi-transparent jade tone tinged with green. Her cheeks, formerly plump, had gradually slendered in time, so that her face, already small, now seemed even smaller and more attractive. Her face was quite narrow, but the space between her eyebrows was quite wide. Her eyes were bright, delicately pretty and seductive. On the balcony, Fourth Master had resumed playing his *huqin* and Liusu couldn't help but tilting her head to one side, in tune with the rising and falling of the melody: her eyes started fluttering, her hands dancing to the music. As she performed while facing the mirror, the *huqin* no longer sounded like a *huqin*, but flutes and strings playing a secret imperial court dance. She took a few steps to the right, then to the left. Her steps seemed to trace the lost rhythm of ancient melodies. Suddenly, she smiled - a secret, malevolent

<sup>27</sup> Later on in the story, she openly admits to Fan Liuyuan: "I'm not good at anything, I'm a utterly useless person" (Zhang [1943] 2009, 123).

smile. The music ceased abruptly. Then the *huqin* resumed playing on the outside, but it was telling old and distant tales of filial piety and moral integrity - tales that had nothing to do with her. (Zhang [1943] 2009, 117-18)

In this mirror scene, Bai Liusu is intently engaged in a cynical appraisal of her own image, performing an imaginary courtship dance which could sweep all traditional values away and establish her control over destiny. While watching her reflection, she already seems to be preparing for a strategic battle array, with beauty and physical appearance functioning as a way to free herself from the shackles of family constraints and as possible ammunition to be used against a man and win his assets. The woman smiling her 'secret, malevolent' smile looks more like she's preparing for aggression than for romance, fleeing the past to finally meet the future. In order to do so, she has to transform her 'floating, unconnected' present as a woman with no identity of her own, so that her search for a man may also become a search for her own identity, to make her drifting self become whole.

When destiny accidentally happens to send a man along her way - Fan Liuyuan, a rich playboy educated in England and wishing to settle down after years of debauchery - Bai Liusu initially has no conscious plan of conquering him: he has been chosen as the ideal husband candidate for her stepsister. Yet, as soon as Fan Liuyuan shows more interest in her than on the woman chosen by the family, Bai Liusu realizes she has to use all her weapons to steal him from other women, in a fight over "the prey everyone eyed like greedy tigers" (Zhang [1943] 2009, 122). Her first, casual attempt at catching the man's attention is a reenacting of the performance opposite the mirror, being centred again on dancing as both a form of seduction and as a way to escape from family constraints: Liusu spends quite a lot of time at the dance hall, enjoying three dances with Liuyuan. This behaviour is easily condemned by her relatives as sinful, implying that no respectable woman knows how to dance: though dance halls were very popular symbols of modernity in Shanghai at the time, they couldn't possibly be seen as spaces devoted to legitimate courtship by traditional families like the Bai household. Yet, no matter what the family might think, the 'prey' seems to be interested in Liusu indeed: he secretly arranges a meeting with her in Hong Kong, where he has temporarily settled down. So, accompanied by Mrs. Xu, a close relative of the Bai family, Liusu finally sets off for the British colony, hoping to strengthen her conquest strategy and finally secure her role as a married woman.

For all her triumphant glee over leaving home and her dream of conquering a 'prey', though, Bai Liusu has no idea of how to behave or what to do once arrived in Hong Kong: cast away from her usual



space, she has no moral compass to guide her in her independence-driven decisions. Alone in an “alien” (Lee 1999, 295) place, she is far from being the conqueror she believed she could be, and her idea of dealing with Fan Liuyuan as a prey stolen from ‘greedy tigers’ proves to be a figment of her imagination. Chinese women in the 1940s (more specifically, *nüren*, the terms Zhang uses to define ‘women’ in the story)<sup>28</sup> could not be conquerors, the author clearly implies; men were the only ones in control of the situation and the only ones who could dictate their own terms – which is precisely what Fan Liuyuan does throughout their courtship. The only strategy Bai Liusu can resort to, then, is accepting the rules of the game to secure a role for herself and have a chance at winning the ‘war’ against Fan Liuyuan, and possibly conquer his assets. According to Leo Ou-fan Lee, role-playing is not just a token of male rule in the story, but also a key element within Liusu’s strategy of survival and an empowering one too, because it allows her to impersonate an ‘alien’ (read ‘non-traditional’) woman displaying ‘alien’ manners. Yet, like Lee himself admits, this role-playing strategy eventually results in a reversal of roles, with the ‘conqueror’ Liusu feeling more and more like the conquered one: being a returnee man educated in Europe, in his search for the quintessence of traditional Chinese womanhood, Fan Liuyuan regards Liusu “as an exotic Oriental woman under his colonial gaze” (Lee 1999, 295), so that the woman rapidly turns into the colonized space while the man turns into the conquering colonizer. Besides, Fan Liuyuan’s answer to Liusu’s candid confession of her supposed uselessness clearly corroborates his colonial appropriation of Liusu’s traditional Chineseness and womanhood.<sup>29</sup> This does not mean Liusu wants to give in easily: she is a natural-born fighter and a very aggressive one too<sup>30</sup> and she still believes she can conquer it all – money, marriage, status, and everything else (possibly including a true independent *nüxing* space). Their whole courtship to one another in Hong Kong is described as a sort of sophisticated abstract war, a set of chess moves whose main purpose ultimately seems to be

**28** The following comment by the narrator perfectly encapsulates the typical shrewd and sanguine *nüren* mindset of 1940s women living and writing in the areas occupied by Japan: “A woman [*yi ge nüren* 一个女人], no matter how charming she might be, won’t be respected by her own sex if she does not get the love of the opposite sex. So despicable can women [*nürenmen* 女人们] prove to be” (Zhang [1943] 2009, 120).

**29** “It’s the useless women [*wuyong de nüren* 无用的女人] who are the most amazing” (Zhang [1943] 2009, 123).

**30** Zhang Ailing herself describes the character of Bai Liusu as “a very strong person, decisive and eloquent”, so not as useless as the character herself might claim to be (Zhang [1944] 2003a, 122).

either the fall or the ensnaring of the opponent<sup>31</sup> within the trap of 'romance': Bai Liusu cautiously treads on this path trying to detect any *faux pas* on the man's part, possibly unveiling his real intentions, i.e. marrying or playing her. Fan Liuyuan's constant teasing her with public displays of intimacy is undermined by private cold manners and overt indifference over the possibility of a life together in the future. This game proves so self-consuming that Bai Liusu finally gives in, first by leaving Hong Kong when all seems lost, then by returning once again to come to terms with the prospect of being a kept woman – that is, by accepting the man's conditions after their interpersonal 'war' has ended, because negotiation has failed and one of them inevitably needs to capitulate. In her unveiling of Chinese women's desperate lack of agency in the semitraditional (and semicolonial) 1940s, Zhang Ailing makes it perfectly clear that Bai Liusu has to be the one to capitulate and eventually be content with anything the rich man suggests, because she has no other choice left: by securing her own financial stability, Liusu at least can finally live in a house all by herself. But when Fan Liuyuan temporarily leaves for England, war and conquest slowly fade away and she suddenly feels deflated and without a purpose, like "a warrior without a battlefield" (Zhang [1943] 2009, 135). Her physical and metaphorical journey seems to have ended, bringing her personal war to a close: in a way, she has 'conquered' her own life leaving family constraints behind by becoming the (probably disreputable) mistress of a rich man; yet, a new reversal of events will bring *actual* war to her door, turning the whole city of Hong Kong into an empty battlefield.

When war comes, on 8 December 1941, Bai Liusu's selfish drive for self-preservation is amplified by history wrecking time and space. The Japanese invade the island and everything falls apart – walls, houses, existence. Curiously, though, Fan Liuyuan reappears: his ship has never left Hong Kong's harbor because of the attack and they are forced to be reunited by war – physical, brutal, collective war, not the abstract and sophisticated dialogical war they used to play together. This radical change in the fabric of reality creates a shift in their interaction; cold strategy and negotiation make way to basic human weakness and fear of loneliness, so they spontaneously seek shelter in one another because there's no one else to turn to and nothing left to do:

in that unstable world, money, property, permanent things – they were all unreliable. The only thing she could rely on was the breath in her lungs, and that person sleeping beside her [...]. He was just

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**31** "It was like facing a great enemy who would finish you off standing perfectly still" (Zhang [1943] 2009, 129).

a selfish man; she was just a selfish woman. In that age of chaos and disorder, there was no place for those who stood on their own. (Zhang [1943] 2009, 139)

Their unexpected reconciliation in the city wrecked by war functions as a desperate, selfish clinging to one another in a crumbling world. And perhaps it's precisely because of these exceptional circumstances – the separation between them abruptly interrupted by actual war and their hungry embracing this sudden reunification – that Fan Liuyuan decides to officially organize a marriage, finally making Bai Liusu the *de facto* winner in their personal war against one another, “his wife in name and in truth” (Zhang [1943] 2009, 140). Bai Liusu seems to revel in this unexpected turn of events: she has secured a complete victory over man, family and society, a victory so strong as to cause an entire city to collapse, like the legendary beauties of the past managed to do.<sup>32</sup> She feels Hong Kong's fall was somehow necessary for her to triumph in the end, though it is easy to detect the narrator's sarcasm behind Bai Liusu's thoughts.<sup>33</sup> After all, what the woman protagonist really achieves in the end is very little, as she will depend on a man for the rest of her life. As Jessica Tsui Yan Li puts it, she

becomes an ordinary housewife with signs of the usual frustration with life in a down-to-earth marriage, rather than turning into a heroine to achieve enlightenment. (Tsui 2012, 44)

In Zhang's universe, there are neither heroes nor heroines; despite her thinking about the legendary *femmes fatales* of the past, implying she might be as powerful, beautiful and dangerous as them, Bai Liusu in the end remains an oppressed Chinese woman of the 1940s with very limited prospects. Her victory is in fact disappointing, because it just reinstates the role traditional Chinese society expected from

**32** The theme of the *femme fatale* causing a whole city to fall, which the title of Zhang's novella alludes to, stems from two main traditional sources. The first two lines of the third stanza from the *Shijing* 詩經 (Book of Odes), Ode 264, read: “Zhefu cheng cheng, zhefu qing cheng 哲夫成城, 哲婦傾城 (A clever man builds cities, a clever woman makes them fall)” (Couvreur 2004, 414). A passage from the *Qian Hanshu* 前漢書 (History of the Former Han Dynasty) reads: “Beifang you jiarren, jue shi er duli. Yi gu qing ren cheng, zai gu qing ren guo 北方有佳人, 絕世而獨立。一顧傾人城, 再顧傾人國 (In the north there's a beauty, independent in her ways and unparalleled to any other in the world; with just one look, she will make a city fall; with another look, she will make a whole nation fall)” (Ban s.d.).

**33** Leo Ou-fan Lee explains how Zhang Ailing uses “an almost omniscient narratorial voice that not only hovers or enters into the characters effortlessly but also constantly comments on them with an intimate and *bemused* tone”, using a voice which “places itself both inside and outside the world of fictional characters” (Lee 1999, 285-6; emphasis added).

women, that is, being “the appendage of men” (Wang 2014, 37).<sup>34</sup> Her aggressive quest for social status and economic stability only leads to frustration as the desolate *huqin* sound in the end of the novella suggests: after the war ends, Fan Liuyuan will probably leave again, thus turning Bai Liusu into a concubine again, a wife only in name:

no matter how astute Liusu is, in the end Liuyuan wins out [...]. In the same way that a fallen city can give rise to an unexpected wedding, it can also render a marriage meaningless. Not long after the wedding, Liuyuan leaves for South East Asia and Liusu is left on her own to live the life of a kept woman, in fact if not in law. (Kam 2012b, 25)

So Liusu's final victory is at best accidental, a by-product of the world suddenly being wrecked by war – and illusional – because it is ultimately orchestrated by Fan Liuyuan, not by her. Bai Liusu's real gains are survival and self-preservation, not independence. Hers is a *nüren* tale of a ghost trapped in an empty space but still trying to salvage some pieces of a broken *nüxing* self out of the debris of history, getting on with her life despite everything at all costs, because Zhang Ailing's ultimate goal in her story was not to describe a woman's path to awakening and self-awareness but “to capture some stability and constancy in a collapsing world” (Kam 2012b, 24), despite knowing this stability might prove to be just an illusion, an empty shell leaving the longed-for *nüxing* self still unconnected and misplaced.

#### 4 Empty Fragments Floating. Urban Spaces and the Unconnectedness of Woman

Urban space is a crucial element within *Qing cheng zhi lian*: both Shanghai and Hong Kong provide an important imaginal backdrop for Bai Liusu's fight towards self-preservation and in her war/courtship with Fan Liuyuan, each city symbolizing a different representation of war and also a different version of female unconnectedness.

Being concerned with everyday life, Zhang Ailing's depiction of Shanghai is often allusive and indirect: far from being the hybrid pre-globalized modern biopolis (Kong 2009) where East and West imperfectly coexisted,<sup>35</sup> the city is reduced in size and the narrator focuses

<sup>34</sup> “By analysing the family ambience Zhang Ailing lived and grew up in, we realize that women at the time were still considered to be as nothing more than the appendage of men” (Wang 2014, 37).

<sup>35</sup> Shanghai was a semi-colony “in the hybrid sense of a mixture of colonial and Chinese elements” (Lee 1999, 309).

on the small “localized world” (Lee 1999, 271) of confined domestic spaces, characterized by a strange combination of sensuous, elegant timelessness and stifled individual choice. These spaces may occasionally open and reinstate time whenever the main characters “enter into the public arena” (Lee 1999, 275), that is when they take part in the modernity of Shanghai by going to restaurants, dance halls, cinemas, coffeehouses. Bai Liusu herself finds access to the modern atmosphere of the city when she and her family go to the movies first and to a dance hall later on the first night she meets Fan Liuyuan. This fictional reduction of Shanghai to a world of detail, as opposed to its reality as a cosmopolitan city,<sup>36</sup> indirectly hints at war hovering on the desolate contrast between indoor decadent (and decaying) immutability and outdoor glittering glamour: despite the city of Shanghai “reached the pinnacle of its urban glory in the early 1930s”, after its partial occupation by the Japanese in 1937-41 and its entire capitulation to the invaders in 1942 – exactly when Zhang Ailing returned to the city (Yu 2008, 62) – its splendor and cosmopolitanism was “already on the wane” (Lee 1999, 322-3). The reduction of the invaded city to a detailed microcosmos of daily rituals and “atomized lives’ marginality” (Kong 2009, 281) was Zhang Ailing’s way of mentally erasing war and its potential threat of wreckage from her writing, creating a small familial (often female-centred) and personal world sealed from within not to face the without of public history. Yet somehow her beloved Shanghai as an occupation-infected city persists in the world of details she creates because it is “a part that is always already broken from a presumed ‘whole’ [...] itself cut off, incomplete, and desolate” (Chow 1991, 114). Everything in the Shanghai segment of the novella seems displaced and cut off from the rest of the world, already falling apart itself: there are no landmarks describing the city at large, only domestic spaces and/or nameless places of entertainment. Trapped in-between these elegant zones tinged with decay and nostalgia, Bai Liusu can’t help but feeling paralyzed within the suffocating enclosure of the Bai household.<sup>37</sup> Her status as a di-

**36** As Leo Ou-fan Lee explains in his book, “Shanghai in the 1930s was the cosmopolitan city par excellence” (Lee 1999, 315) and also “the largest city in China [...], the place where most of its literature was produced and circulated to the country at large” (Lee 1999, xi) as well as “the fifth largest city in the world and China’s largest harbor and treaty port, a city that was already an international legend (‘The Paris of Asia’), and a world of splendid modernity set apart from the still tradition-bound countryside that was China” (xiv). The word *módēng* 摩登 ‘modern’ itself was coined in Shanghai, thus making the city and the concept of modernity permanently linked to one another. Here traditional Chinese buildings and Western high-rise American skyscrapers, *art déco* interior designs and neoclassical British imperial buildings coexisted side by side.

**37** “While she lives squarely within a stable domestic environment and a cosmopolitan landscape, a sense of intense *entrapment* and *claustrophobia* permeates her experience of Shanghai” (Kong 2009, 284; emphasis added).

voiced (thus 'failed') woman detached from the rest of the family is symbolized by two scrolls hanging on the wall, where "each character seemed to float in emptiness, far from the paper's surface. Liusu herself felt like one of those characters, floating and unconnected" (Zhang [1943] 2009, 117). Woman is reduced in size to a small set of Chinese characters aimlessly floating in the air, lost in an "infinite self-atomizing" situation (Kong 2009, 281):<sup>38</sup> she is a fleeting silhouette who may easily be swept away leaving no trace behind, just like modernity and cosmopolitanism were waning from Shanghai, constantly under the threat of evanescing in time and space<sup>39</sup> in the wake of the Japanese invasion. What Bai Liusu ultimately needs is a new configuration of space, not just an opening of her atomized familial enclave into Shanghai's shattered modernity, but a new "spatial imagination" (Kong 2009, 293) granting her permanent survival as a woman, and possibly giving her a way out of unconnectedness.

The site Zhang Ailing chooses to stage this new spatial imagination is Hong Kong, itself yet another version of a Chinese city conquered by foreigners, but with one notable difference: Hong Kong was *indeed* a colony, not a semicolonial atomized cosmopolis like Shanghai. The British had officially taken control of the island in 1841 and had been ruling there ever since (Tsang 2004, 16). Its being traditional and utterly colonial, without any of the modern architectural and cultural audacities Shanghai had gone through in the 1930s certainly had a strong impact on Zhang upon her arrival as a student – a negative one. As Leo Ou-fan Lee puts it, "Hong Kong did not have Shanghai's '*cultivation*' (*hanyang*), a word that originally referred to the cultured sophistication of a person who has the elegant appearance of self-restraint"; on the contrary, Hong Kong was "too blatant, too vulgar and flamboyant in its Western imitation, hence producing cultural kitsch" (Lee 1999, 327). Seen from a Shanghainese perspective, Hong Kong was an undistinguished cultural desert, a floating Chinese space dominated by Britain, not just a proud treaty port never fully colonized nor conquered by foreign powers. Why, then, did Zhang Ailing choose Hong Kong as the site of a possible new configuration of spatial imagination for her heroine? Was it just to pay a tribute to the city she had found temporary refuge in as a student, or were there other reasons too?

From 1937 onwards, Hong Kong had served as a temporary site for refugees escaping from Japan-invaded mainland China, turning the

**38** More specifically, Kong analyses wartime Shanghai as a "polycentric" site characterized by a proliferation of boundaries, also focusing on Shanghai as an open city (Kong 2009, 293-4; 297-8).

**39** What actually took place after the chaos of the civil war in 1945 and the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949: Shanghai inexorably decayed and faded from the new rural-based Chinese nation's memory (Lee 1999, 323).

city into “an important lifeline to China” (Tsang 2004, 114): historically, Hong Kong represented a *temporary* place of refuge for people who wanted to start life afresh, but conceptually it was already “not so much a place but a space of transit” (Abbas 1997, 4), granting passage towards elsewhere. Yet Bai Liusu travels to Hong Kong hoping to write her own destiny and leave her mark into existence: to her, Hong Kong first looks like a space of unexpected promises, a space where she can permanently flow and no longer float, mainly because of its distance from home, and thus from Shanghai. Zhang’s first description of the city upon the protagonist’s arrival conveys precisely this sense of promise; her depiction of Hong Kong is somehow already characterized by a postmodern “visual density” (Abbas 1997, 35): there are no words drifting unconnected but huge billboards and vibrant contrasts everywhere, creating a picture of wonder, “a city of such hyperboles” (Zhang [1943] 2009, 122) where there seem to be no boundaries but crowded spatial and visual juxtapositions. Whereas Shanghai’s cityscape was only indirectly suggested to heighten its “urban - and urbane - sophistication” (Lee 1999, 340), Hong Kong’s skyline - the Victoria Harbour every ship and boat can see upon their arrival on the island - is vividly described with all its ostentatious exaggeration, a violence of “clashing colours plunged in murderous confusion” (Zhang [1943] 2009, 122). Hong Kong is hyperbolic excess, with no room for the “hidden colourfulness” (Zhang [1944] 2003c, 8)<sup>40</sup> Shanghai was characterized by. Paradoxically, it is precisely in this saturation of visual elements that lies a possible new configuration of spatial imagination for Bai Liusu: far from the restrained elegance of her family rooms in Shanghai and into the splashing excessive colours of Hong Kong, she can finally hope to step out of impermanence and write her own her-story.<sup>41</sup>

This idea of Hong Kong as a city associated to permanence rather than to the impermanence a ‘space of transit’ might suggest is reinforced by the second view on the city, characterized by specific landmarks or spatial symbols whereas Shanghai’s description was devoid of them. First, the narrator briefly introduces the Repulse Bay Hotel which, as Abbas explains, was “a grand colonial-style building that became a famous Hong Kong landmark” (Abbas 1997, 8) after being built in the 1920s. Consequently, in the late 1930s and early 1940s (when presumably Zhang herself visited the hotel), everyone considered it to be “a fashionable meeting place” (Abbas 1997, 8), a potent symbol of wealth and entertainment. Then Zhang shifts our atten-

<sup>40</sup> See Chang [1944] 2005, 8. Andrew F. Jones’ rendering of *miyan* 秘艳 as ‘coy allure’, though far more poetic, does not account for the idea of ‘hidden colourfulness’ suggested by the set of two characters.

<sup>41</sup> Meant as a feminist-oriented version of his-tory.

tion to another symbol, located beyond the hotel: a wall, something virtually anonymous, almost unreal and out of place, if associated to the glamour of the Repulse Bay Hotel and the excess of Hong Kong's skyline. Despite being an odd presence, "like a left-over object from another era" (Lee 1999, 296), the wall does not suggest any idea of transit or floating, but rather firmness and durability in its 'sublime' elevation. Its description is characterized by "the colour of death" (Zhang [1943] 2009, 126), but it highlights Bai Liusu's face turning red by contrast, filling it with the colour of life. Fan Liuyuan even hints at the idea that the wall might last longer than the end of the entire world, and Liusu's tacit acceptance of his hopeful prediction gives an aura of grandeur and ahistorical universality to the wall itself, despite its being a residual of history persisting in wartime:

Someday, human civilization will be completely destroyed, everything will be utterly eroded, burst, collapsed and ruined, but maybe this wall will still be here. (Zhang [1943] 2009, 126)

The wall evokes the idea of timelessness, as opposed to the ticking of time slowly corrupting and changing things. As Wang Xiaoping puts it, it simultaneously symbolizes middle class' "strong will to live an eternally peaceful, comfortable life" and "a world in which meaning and life are once more indivisible" (Wang 2012, 574). So, the wall symbolizes a world and a society devoid of war where the self can finally exist and persist in time and space, but it may also symbolize the soul and the immaterial outliving the body and the material, as well as culture winning over nature, eternity winning over history.

This sense of durability and timelessness is echoed by the fourth stanza of Poem 31, Chapter 3, Section 1, of the *Shijing* 詩經 (Book of Odes), later quoted by Fan Liuyuan. The poem is called *Jigu* 擊鼓 (Beating the War Drum) and the original text reads:

死生契闊  
與子成說  
執子之手  
與子偕老  
(Couvreur 2004, 36)<sup>42</sup>

Facing death, life and distance,  
I promised to be faithful to you;

<sup>42</sup> Zhang misquotes the second line of the fourth stanza, using *xiangshuo* 相說 instead of *chengshuo* 成說. The poem describes the lament of a soldier who is forced to leave his family and beloved to go to war for his prince, yet the ending of the poem (which is not included in Zhang's novella) suggests that the soldier will not manage to come back and his promise won't be fulfilled, so the overall tone is one of desolation.



Holding your hands in mine,  
I swore I would grow old with you.

Both the wall and the poem are strong symbols within the courtship strategy between Bai Liusu and Fan Liuyuan: though used by the man as tokens of a supposedly eternal love vow, they are tacitly accepted by the woman, who apparently is familiar neither with Hong Kong and its landmarks nor with Chinese classical culture. Caught in an aggressive ruthless *nüren* search for durability out of her unconnected status as divorcee woman without a prospect, Bai Liusu can easily believe in something as immortal as a classical poem and in something as strong and fixed as a wall. Like foundations built to last, words and bricks can forge fate and identity against a world afloat, where everything seems to be vague and uncertain. Yet for a woman like Bai Liusu, grown in a traditional late-Qing elite background, to be *both* durable and true, an eternal love vow must include marriage, a further symbol of stability, something Fan Liuyuan seems not so willing to comply to. So the promise and the poetic symbols emanating from 'the city of such hyperboles' seem to be void of any actual meaning: the drifting unconnected self Bai Liusu was destined to be for the rest of her life in Shanghai still lingers on, leaving the whole 'romance' between her and Fan Liuyuan vague and confused.<sup>43</sup> Hong Kong remains a space of floating colours and void promises vanishing, just like Shanghai was reduced to Bai Liusu's suffocating room with empty characters floating on a scroll. Thus, her decision to go back to Shanghai and face the 'shame' of finding a job to support herself comes out of despair and impossibility of permanence, not out of a real *nüxing* agency. For a revolutionary May Fourth-oriented woman, looking for a job as a way to survive would mean real power and independence, but Bai Liusu is no revolutionary; she's just an ordinary woman with neither skills nor culture, trapped in a male-dominated world where failing to secure marriage to a rich man can only mean defeat – and eventually disappearance. That is why when Fan Liuyuan calls on her to join him once again in Hong Kong, she cannot choose but go: like a drifting flower, she floats in the upstream current of 'romance', hoping to find a space of reappearance where she can finally bloom.

The Hong Kong Bai Liusu goes back to, though, is no longer the city of hyperboles she discovered on her first visit, but a space characterized by absence: the landscape is reduced in size to the moon's, seen

<sup>43</sup> "These acts of courtship are nothing but a casual and spiritual game of two hedonists [...], they float on the surface of feelings" (Xun 1986, 124-5). Despite Xun Yu's remarks were meant as a negative critique on the novella, the floating he suggests corroborates my idea.

as “merely a hook of white” (Zhang [1943] 2009, 123); besides, there is no room waiting for her at the glamorous Repulse Bay Hotel this time, just a house devoid of people, an “empty realm” (Zhang [1943] 2009, 124) where she is destined to live on her own for a whole year, as Fan Liuyuan is abroad on business and he has rented a place for her to stay and wait for his return.

In this new attempt at escaping her own unconnectedness towards life, Bai Liusu ends up living disconnected towards anyone else, alone as a kept woman in an empty house echoing her empty heart (and the other way round). Perhaps here more than elsewhere, Bai Liusu acknowledges her situation and the space she inhabits not for their fallacious promise of durability, but for their contingent possibility of self-preservation: why bother becoming the official wife of Fan Liuyuan when she can simply be his mistress and enjoy his money anyway? Being a matter-of-fact ‘space of transit’, once again Hong Kong proves to be the perfect location for Bai Liusu’s awakening to women’s limited options in a male-dominated society. In such an unsentimental and prosaic place where “everything floats – currencies, values, human relations” (Abbas 1997, 4), raw survival becomes more important than any pretense of respectability. Her choice becomes merely a practical one, so as to pick up the broken pieces of her female self.

As war comes and Fan Liuyuan unexpectedly returns, though their clinging to one another may function as an extreme attempt to reconnect the past to the present, what is left are just empty fragments floating in a dead city, itself a world of fragmented ruins:

there was only a stream of empty air, a bridge of emptiness leading to darkness, into the void of voids. Here, everything had ended. There were only some broken bits of desolate wall [...]; in fact, there was nothing left. (Zhang [1943] 2009, 139)

No matter how hard Bai Liusu imagines the wall may still be standing as a space symbolizing eternity and durability, what we are shown here is just the wall’s non-appearance, its image being replaced by a scene of wreckage instead. If everything else we can actually see has fallen, why should an unseen (and thus unseeable) wall still be there? Despite the *Shijing* poem’s vow proving right and Bai Liusu’s original plan – becoming a legitimate wife – coming to pass, her newly found social and financial safety won’t grant her any wholeness. Clearly functioning as a metonymy for the city of Hong Kong whose space vanishes in the end, the absent wall may also symbolize Bai Liusu’s volatile self in its illusion of asserting a true form of *nüxing* power – her supposedly ‘dangerous’ beauty making an entire city fall – which in fact reinstates her floating status of unconnected woman but which paradoxically helps her survive somehow, alone, with her husband gone and no talent of her own to rely on. And the pos-

sibility of a new configuration of space, from the stifled family room of Shanghai to the excessive flamboyant clashing of colours in Hong Kong, is ultimately dissolved in the ground zero of war – but the broken bits of *nüren* are still standing, and perhaps her true *nüxing* independent nature might resurface one day.

## 5 Conclusions. A (Post) Modern View on History

In *Qing cheng zhi lian* Zhang Ailing explored the ways through which historical, social and cultural circumstances forced Chinese elite women to “learn to give up their own desires in exchange for their social ‘place’” (Chow 1993, 94). Consequently, her woman protagonist opted for a spatial quest which still confined her within an oppressive *nei* dimension she paradoxically managed to oppose through an aggressive counter-hegemony, war-like strategy, thus avoiding the role of victim.

Also, the final collapse of Hong Kong as opposed to the fleeting persistence of woman are an intriguing testimony to Zhang Ailing's ambivalence towards history with its wrecking time, space and the female self. On the one hand, the novella's conclusion proves the author was deeply inside the fabric of history:

her intoxication of the impending danger during the Japanese bombing are all underscored with an acute self-consciousness of her own powerlessness, capsulated by the term ‘*wunai*’ [...] a sense of keen awareness of the ephemerality and arbitrariness of subjective experiences. Self-consuming, personal anguish is ultimately irrelevant in the face of the overwhelming violence of history. (Chang 1993, 223)<sup>44</sup>

In the end, both the empty city of Hong Kong and the empty heart of woman seem to float together like meaningless characters on a scroll, becoming symbols of human ephemerality and meaninglessness while facing history. Yet, it is precisely because of history forcing its way inside the novella through war, building a fleeting and impermanent present out of the disintegration of the past, that the potentially feminist status of *nüxing* can emerge: despite her victory ultimately is ephemeral, Bai Liusu manages to survive and soldier on into the future, hopefully outliving her former aggressive *nüren* strategy by positioning herself no longer as a mere female replica of

<sup>44</sup> *Wunai* 无奈 literally means ‘having no other choice nor alternative’. In a way, the story also focuses on “the conflict between a single woman's fortune and the fate of the whole nation or whole civilization” (Meng [1991] 1993, 127).

a man, but as an independent woman-subject with 'an organic will of her own', immersed in history but not defeated by its ravaging pull.

On the other hand, though, Zhang Ailing's

best works "The Golden Cangue" and "Love in a Fallen City" transcend historical awareness and moral judgement, which is precisely what makes these works such remarkable masterpieces. (Liu 2009)

As Liu Zaifu further points out,

with its social concern, modern Chinese literature is, in general, focused on condemning the injustices in society, but it does not ask questions about the meaning of human existence. Yet Zhang Ailing masterfully describes many human tragedies as she asks these questions. (Liu 2009)

Because her main concern was with "rejecting the historical trend" (Liu 2009) - which does not necessarily imply rejecting history *per se*, though.

I rather think that Zhang Ailing was *both inside* history - in her analysis of Chinese society's (and women's) collapse in a period wrecked by war and in her using "a melancholy evocative of the irreversible disintegration of an old China" (Chang 1993, 222) - *and outside* history, transcending it as a Chinese elite individualistic *nüren* of the 1940s, that is as a woman still having no defined her-story to reveal but seeing things both from a limited *wunai* 无奈 perspective and from a lucid, potentially liberating *nüxing* perspective, that same perspective her own mother had helped her foresee in her own self and in women's destiny in general. As Qiao Yigang puts it:

Chang's description of women's imprisoned soul and analysis of the female unconscious reveals the truth that although the lifestyle of urban women has been revolutionized, the mindset of many women has not undergone any significant change [...]. Such a phenomenon is the result of traditional beliefs and women's lack of self-esteem. Whether they are old-fashioned women, like Cao Qiqiao, or new women, like Bai Liusu and Ge Weilong, women in Chang's works are "subjects with agency", albeit limited in their worlds. They live under the threat of traditional culture that drives them gradually into "a corner without light". Chang senses a crisis in the portrayal of women. (Qiao 2010, 84)

It is once again this ambivalence between desolation and rebellion, his-story and her-story, *nüren* and *nüxing*, that ultimately makes Bai Liusu both a powerless, disconnected traditional woman and a would-

be optimistic winner in the game of life, floating in perpetuity like a fragment in the empty house of history, both inside it and transcending it in the impossibility of finding a permanent space of her own but constantly suspended in an eternal war-like quest for self-affirmation.

This is yet another example of Zhang's in-betweenness, something making her far too modern and almost on the brink of postmodernism in her focusing on the details of "little narratives" (Andermahr, Lowell, Wolkowitz 2000, 208):<sup>45</sup> as a daughter escaping a violent father yet also as a writer celebrating the decadent life of late-Qing male-dominated society; as an admirer of her liberated Westernized mother yet also as a cynicist denying women's actual ability to find liberation in a society dominated by men; as a 'Shanghaiense, after all' yet writing about Hong Kong as well. As a woman with a double name, one in Chinese, one in English, like two characters floating on a scroll, consciously disconnected from her contemporaries' preoccupations with socially-oriented and political literature,<sup>46</sup> but strongly connected to her own talent, the only constant in a world wrecked by history and war.

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**45** "Postmodernism refuses master narratives which purport to explain the whole movement of history and social life as a single interconnected totality. Postmodernism offers instead 'little narratives' which do not necessarily add up, but which may be woven together as a succession of short threads into a blanket. The search for the fundamental causes of injustice, oppression, the movement of history, is ruled out of court" (Andermahr, Lowell, Wolkowitz 2000, 208). In a way, Zhang's stubborn refusal of dealing with the master narrative of political liberation shared by most of her contemporaries makes her already a postmodern writer, albeit caught within the frame of a semi-traditional, semi-colonial modern space.

**46** 1942, a year before Zhang Ailing wrote *Qing cheng zhi lian*, Mao Zedong notably wrote his famous *Zai Yan'an wenyi zuotanhui shang de jianghua* 在延安文藝座談會上的講話 (Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art). See Cannella 2014.

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