

Chasing After Nothingness—Reading Zhang Ailing Through Žižek’s Interpretation of Lacan

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Abstract

This article provides a Lacanian reading of one of the short stories of Zhang Ailing, a Chinese writer. It is intended to explore the possibility of employing Lacan’s theory of the symbolic order to the interpretation of a Chinese text, as well as to broaden our understanding of Zhang’s work and to unlock the potential of the applicability of Lacan’s ideas. The final part of the article will draw on Žižek’s interpretation of Lacan to illustrate how Zhang, unlike most of her contemporaries, is exempted from the obsession with China and how this obsession can lead us to the conclusion that whatever we chase obsessively in life is nothing but nothingness.

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Introduction

The aim of this article is to examine the symbolic worlds of Zhang Ailing and the character Pan Ruliang (潘汝良) in her short story “Nianqing de Shihou” 年輕的時後 (In the Years of Youth). It will

demonstrate how the tragedy that strikes Ruliang is a literary transformation and representation of the writer's own agony caused by disillusionment. In addition, the arguments will also explicate why the disillusionment can be regarded as the inevitable result of Zhang Ailing's obsession with China, which will be set against C.T. Hsia's essay, "Obsession with China: The Moral Burden of Modern Chinese Literature," to reach the conclusion that modern Chinese writers' obsession with China is actually the testament to their obsession with the West.

The article is divided into five sections. The first provides a summary of former psychoanalytical studies of Zhang Ailing's works. The second examines the relationship between fantasy and desires, expounding how fantasy makes symbolic order subjective. The discussion will be based on Lacan's theory about symbolic order and on Žižek's elaboration of the idea of "objectively subjective fantasy." Both of these will be applied to the studies of two autobiographic essays by Zhang in section three, and then to the understanding of "In the Years of Youth" in section four.

The final section will synthesize the arguments put forward in the previous sections to spell out the fantasies and desires that grip C.T. Hsia and the modern Chinese writers, whose obsession with China is chastised by Hsia. Moreover, by engaging Žižek in the conclusive part of this article, I also want to reason why the Žižekian analyses of Lacan can help bring another dimension to the reading of Zhang Ailing's writing and illustrate Zhang's notion that no matter how disillusioned we are, we will never stop chasing something that is never there.

The Tradition of Psychoanalytical Reading of Zhang Ailing's Work

The application of psychoanalytical theories to Zhang Ailing's works has been carried out by many researchers and its applicability is now well-established. Zhang Xiaohong adopts Freud's concept of fetishism to examine female protagonists' addition to clothes in Zhang Ailing's stories. Ray Chou applies the Negative Oedipus Complex to profile the masochist mothers Zhang Ailing portrayed. Likewise, Hu Jinyuan takes a Freudian approach to the understanding of the masochistic sides of these maternal characters. Li Zhuoxiong looks at the protagonists in Zhang's "Heart Sutra" and "Jasmine Tea" through the lens of Freud's ideas of narcissism and the Electra Complex, as well as Carl Jung's theory of persona.

Psychoanalytical studies of fantasy and desire represented in Zhang Ailing's works are also another common ground where many research papers converge. In Edward Gunn's book, the Freudian exegesis of the subconscious mind is employed to manifest how an impersonal force in the environment can act out the fantasies of Zhang Ailing's characters. Liao Xianhao connects Lacan's thoughts about the reality of our desires to the atmosphere of Shanghai-ness created in Zhang Ailing's writings. Chen Huiyang pursues Freud and Lacan's concepts to investigate the fantasy of the female spy in Zhang Ailing's later short story, "Lust, Caution."

These are just a few of the many works demonstrating the prevalence of psychoanalytical reading of Zhang Ailing's oeuvre. They offer us a window into a special affinity between her fictions and a psychoanalytical understanding of the world as the distress her characters suffering can be regarded as a display of their psychological states. Aware of the substantial research this academic territory has been irrigated with, I attempt to use Lacan's theories to forge the link between the author and her text, illustrating how Zhang Ailing adapted her personal trauma and reincarnated it in

her short story. Furthermore, to frame this article in a greater picture and also shed new light on C.T. Hsia's essay, I will argue how the obsession with the West portrayed in Zhang's two essays and this short story can be seen as parallel to the obsession with China amongst modern Chinese writers that C.T. Hsia observes, and how two kinds of obsession that are antithetical to each other can actually be equated through Žižek's interpretation of Lacan's views on the interactions between fantasy, desire, and the symbolic order. Finally, with all these discussions, I will locate the point where the philosophies of Lacan, Žižek and Zhang Ailing can converge.

A Symbolic Universe and Objectively Subjective Fantasy

Lacan's work formulates the idea that "to be fully human we are *subjected* to this symbolic order," and everything is "ordered, or structured, in accordance with these symbols and the laws of the symbolic, *including* the unconscious and human subjectivity"¹. Moreover, a speaker as a subject does not possess the signifier, but rather "it is the signifier that determines the subject"² [emphasis in the original]. In other words, one's subjectivity is defined by the signifier designated to him and, as Bruce Fink elaborates, the signifiers can be recognized as our names:

The empty set as the subject's place-holder within the symbolic order is not unrelated to the subject's proper name. That name, for example, is a signifier which has often been selected long before the child's birth, and which inscribes the child in the symbolic. A priori, this name has absolutely

¹ Homer 44

² Homer 47

nothing to do with the subject—it is as foreign to him or her as any other signifier. But in time this signifier—more, perhaps, than any other—will go to the root of his or her being and become inextricably tied to his or her subjectivity. It will become the signifier of his or her very absence as subject, standing in for him or her.³

Accordingly, the signifier becomes the representative of a subject. It describes the individuality of a person and “this is all the more necessary in that, before he disappears as subject beneath the signifier which he becomes, due to the simple fact that it addresses him, he is absolutely nothing.”⁴ Thus, in a symbolic world, a subject can be reduced “to being no more than a signifier.”⁵ As a result, “the signifier is what founds the subject—the signifier is what wields ontic clout, wresting existence from the real that it marks and annuls.”⁶ A signifier thus becomes “the founding word, statements that confer on a person some symbolic title and make him or her what they are proclaimed to be, constituting their symbolic identity.”⁷

The omnipresence of the symbolic order can be attested by Lacan’s words that “the human world, the world that we know and live, in the midst of which we orient ourselves, and without which we are absolutely unable to orientate ourselves, doesn’t only imply the existence of meanings, but the order of the signifiers as well.”⁸ Hence the laws and obligations of the symbolic order not only

³ Bruce Fink 80

⁴ Lacan qtd. in Richard, Fink and Jaanus 265

⁵ Lacan 207

⁶ Fink 80

⁷ Žižek, *How to Read Lacan* 45

⁸ Lacan 189

render us our symbolic identities, it also provides us with signifiers and symbols: the means through which we shape our desires and project our fantasies. Furthermore, when we examine the relation between fantasy and desire, “the first thing to note about fantasy is that it literally teaches us how to desire.”⁹ That is to say, we do not desire things we do not have. Instead, we fantasize about things we do not have and then we desire to have them. The latent peril of fantasy, however, is that it prompts us to crave things that not only do not belong to us but also do not exist at all. It is only when we conceptualize reality through the rose-colored glasses of fantasy do we merge reality with fantasy and entertain the illusion of procuring things that are not there.

Žižek’s discussion of the idea of fantasy as something “subjectively objective” illustrates the formation of this kind of illusion:

Fantasy rather belongs to the ‘bizarre category of the objectively subjective—the way things actually, objectively seem to you even if they don’t seem that way to you. When, for example, we claim that someone who is consciously well disposed towards Jews nonetheless harbours profound anti-Semitic prejudice he is not consciously aware of, do we not claim that (in so far as these prejudices do not render the way Jews really are, but the way they appear to him) *he is not aware how Jews really seem to him?*¹⁰

Therefore, fantasy is assigned by Žižek to the category of “the unknown knowns’, things we don’t know that we know—which is

⁹ *How to Read Lacan* 47

¹⁰₁₀ *How to Read Lacan* 52

precisely the Freudian unconscious, the ‘knowledge that doesn’t know itself’, as Lacan used to say, the core of which is fantasy.”¹¹

The issue we should concern ourselves in this paper is: what is the “subjectively objective” fantasy, the “unknown knowns” of Zhang Ailing and Pan Ruliang? As will be illustrated in the following sections, the Western world they yearn for—the world which objectively seems perfectly agreeable to them—is where their fantasy anchors. However, what they are not aware of is the fact that it is the subjective nature of this fantasy that makes the West appear so alluring to them.

This “subjectively objective fantasy” that haunts Zhang and of which she reincarnates in the fantasy and disillusionment of Pan Ruliang will be the first focus of my analysis. What is equally critical in my argument is that the disillusionment that sears the hearts of the writer and her character demonstrates that they are disenchanted not only because their fantasies are shattered, but also because they pursue a reality that has never existed. In conclusion, I will demonstrate that it is the annulment of the magic of fantasy disguised as reality that exempts Zhang from being one of the modern Chinese writers whom Hsia considers to be obsessed with China and, consequently, we are able to reverse Hsia’s observation by claiming that at the core of these writers’ obsession with China is actually their obsession with the West.

The Objectively Subjective Fantasy in Zhang Ailing’s Life

The symbolic world created in Zhang’s short stories can be traced

¹¹ Žižek, *How To Read Lacan* 52

back to the symbolic order she was subjected to in her life. In her essay “Siyu” 私語 (Whispers), Zhang describes how her world is divided into two symbols of diametrical opposition, the one of brightness and the other of darkness. While her mother stands for the bright world, her father defines the antithetical one:

My mother was gone, but something of her atmosphere lingered in my aunt’s house: an exquisitely carved table with an interlocking “puzzle-piece” mosaic on top, gentle pastel colors, wonderful people whose lives were beyond my ken constantly bustling in and out the front door. All the best things I knew, be they spiritual or material, were contained in those rooms [...].

On the other side was my father’s house. I looked down on everything there: opium, the old tutor who taught my little brother to write his “Discourse on the First Emperor of the Han Dynasty,” old-style linked-chapter fiction, languorous, ashen, dust-laden living. Like a Persian worshipping at the altar of fire, I forcibly divided the world into two halves: bright and dark, good and evil, god and the devil. Whatever belonged to my father’s side was bad.¹²

The world of Zhang’s father is the epitome of the decadent life of people living in the early Republican years when China was too weak to defend against Western aggression. He symbolizes China at the turn of the century: lethargic and impotent, gloomy and bleak. Refusing to face reality, he idled his life away smoking opium. As a result, his room is characteristic of “clouds of opium smoke, hovering like a fog over an untidy room strewn with stacks of tabloids.” When Zhang “sat there for a long time,” she “would

¹² Zhang *Written on Water* 156

always feel that” she “was sinking deeper and deeper into its meshes.”¹³

However, the world that belongs to her mother is a total contrast. She represents the positive side of the West, a world of vitality and promises. She also lives up to Zhang’s imagination as a progressive free spirit when she divorces her father and goes to England to study, a decision that makes her a Chinese feminist vanguard much ahead of her time. Afraid that her future will be buried in her father’s house, Zhang stakes all the expectations for life on her fantasies about her mother’s world:

On the positive side, I was full of vast ambitions and expansive plans. After high school, I would go to England to study... I wanted to make an even bigger splash than Lin Yutang. I wanted to wear only the most exquisite and elegant clothing, to roam the world, to have my own house in Shanghai, to live a crisp and unfettered existence.¹⁴

The desire for a footloose and uninhibited life encourages Zhang to escape from her father’s house in order to start a new life with her mother. Entering the world of brightness, Zhang soon realizes the carefree and delightful western life her mother’s world is synonymous with is nothing but a delusion.

Zhang begins to be racked with the pain of disillusionment when she comes into conflict with her mother because of financial problems. To ask for an allowance from her mother becomes one of the most humiliating experiences in her life. In another essay,

“Tongyan Wuji” 童言無忌 (From the Mouths of Babes), she gives

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

a poignant portrayal of the inevitable embarrassment incurred by the issue of money:

At first, the act of asking my mother for money had a fascinating, intimate charm. This was because I had always loved my mother with a passion bordering on the romantic. She was a beautiful and sensitive woman, and I had had very little opportunity to be with her because she had gone abroad when I was four, coming home only infrequently and going away again soon after each visit. Through a child's eyes, she seemed a distant and mysterious figure. There were a couple of times she took me out when, merely by taking my hand in hers as we crossed the street, she would send an unfamiliar thrill through my body. But later, despite the straits in which she found herself, I had to press her for money every second or third day. The torments I suffered on account of her temper and my own ingratitude little by little extinguished my love for her in a stream of petty mortifications, until nothing was left of it.¹⁵

The sporadic contacts with her mother in her childhood inspire Zhang to create a perfect image of her. Beautiful but distant and mysterious, the woman in Zhang's imagination smacks of the features of a movie star, a stranger whose occasional visits can gladden her heart. However, as she gets to know the real woman her mother is, her romantic fascination is also torn into pieces by the practical concern of money.

Toward the end of "Whispers," Zhang is flustered and puzzled by the looming fact that her mother and the Western world encoded

¹⁵ *Written on Water* 4

in her life are not what Zhang wants them to be:

I had grown used to being alone at my father's house, which produced in me an abrupt desire to grow up and be responsible for myself. To play the sheltered daughter in straitened circumstances seemed a terrible burden. At the same time, I could see that my mother had sacrificed quite a lot for me and that she doubted whether I was worth the sacrifice. I shared her doubts. I often went all alone to the top of the apartment building to take a solitary walk around the roof. The white stucco Spanish walls cut sharp lines across the blue of the sky, shearing the world into two. I would lift my face to the fierce sun above, standing exposed before the sky and its judgment and, like every confused adolescent, hang suspended between overweening pride and intense self-loathing.

It was from that time onward that my mother's house was no longer full of tenderness.¹⁶

When her ambitious plans for a prosperous future became lackluster, we see Zhang pacing back and forth on the roof of her apartment building, anxious and bewildered, wondering whether she was worth all the sacrifices her mother made. She fell prey to the sense of uncertainty when her mother's house was deprived of the warmth that once urged her to flee away from her father's world.

To identify the "objectively subjective fantasy" that Zhang regards as reality, we need to first take notice of how she engages her parents in the symbolic order by reducing them to two antithetical

¹⁶ *Written on Water* 161)

signifiers: her father, the murkily languid and ghastly gloomy world of a Chinese opium addict, and her mother, a romantic adventure to the West where an uninhibited life has been promised. However, as people are proclaimed to be are not what they really are, the symbolic identities Zhang imposes on her parents, rather than reflecting their true natures, only reveal what she desires: a successful career accompanied by a fulfilling life that can only be realized in the West. What causes her disillusionment is the fact that the irritable and self-regarding mother she deals with is at variance with the charming, distant, and mysterious mother she imagines. By the same token, the ideal, superior Western world that Zhang considers as the objective reality is nothing but her subjective fantasy. The glamorous Westernized mother and her glorious Western life never exist, but Zhang does not know that it is her fantasy, something she should know is not real but illusionary, which projects a delusive reality she craves and strives for, until disillusionment sets in and the scales fall from her eyes.

The Objectively Subjective Fantasy of "In the Years of Youth"

In this story, the protagonist, Pan Ruliang, is also caught in the polarity between two worlds, one of which signifies the life of Ruliang's family, who are enmeshed in the spiral of spiritual stagnancy:

Ruliang was a patriotic boy, but he did not give much favour towards Chinese people. The foreigners he came to know were either movie stars or good looking and elegant models from cigarette or soap advertisements. The Chinese he was acquainted with were his family. His father was not a villain. Since he was occupied by his business all day long

and rarely stayed at home, Ruliang hardly met him. Thus, he was not averse to him. But, after dinner, his father always drank alone in the living room, with some fried peanuts. The wine made his face flush with a greasy shine, and then he looked like the boss of a small and shabby shop. He ran a soy sauce factory. Anyway, he was also a boss. However... as long as he was his father, he should be the distinguished one among others.¹⁷

The ambiguous feeling Ruliang experiences about his father is engendered by the fact that, though he does not detest him, he does not respect him because he is not outstanding. Not ambitious in his career, his father is content with a humdrum and petty life. The greasiness his face glows with becomes a symbol of a life that is too dirty and sticky to get rid of it. Ruliang's father stands for the squalid world that he wants to detach from. To reinforce this, Zhang pictures him adoring the foreigners who, showcasing their beauty in the movies or advertisements, are in sharp contrast to the mediocrity in Ruliang's *Chinese* family.

In addition, the image of the charming movie stars is associated with the beautiful but mysterious and distant mother Zhang describes in her essay. Again, the world outside China is designated the signifier of a noble and dignified life. Unlike Zhang, however, Ruliang's mother is also part of the world that drives him away. His mother and sisters only make him disparage his family even more:

As for his mother, she was an uneducated woman suffering from the repression of feudal morality. Her life was but a sacrifice [...]. When something distressed her, she did not

¹⁷ Zhang Ailing *Quanji* 6, 184-85

cry. Instead, she found fault with her children and made them cry. When she was free, she would listen to Shaoxing opera or play mahjong. Ruliang had two elder sisters who were also college students. They loved wearing cosmetics. They were not pretty but did not resign themselves to their plain faces. Ruliang did not want women who were like his sisters.¹⁸

For Ruliang, the Shaoxing opera and mahjong characterize the vulgarity of the Chinese life. He disdains these types of entertainment because they expose the boorish nature of his mother. But when his sisters try to defend themselves from being ordinary by applying make-up, their efforts seem to him so futile and stupid, as if there is nothing they can do to change their mediocrity. It is not surprising that “what Ruliang despised most were his brothers and sisters. They were dirty, lazy, irresponsible, and immature.”¹⁹ His discontent with people living under the same roof with him gives birth to a signifier of an ordinary Chinese family blemished by its squalor and vulgarity.

Ruliang is infatuated with coffee and medicine, the representatives of the superiority of western civilization, by which he can distinguish himself from the Chinese philistines:

He had a religious belief in coffee, not because of its aroma, but because of the coffee pot, its complicated structure, its scientific silver colour, and its glittering glass lid. It was due to the same reason he chose to be a student of medicine, largely because medical equipment looked brand new, shiny and bright. Taken out from the suitcase one after another, they were cold metal products, delicate and omnipotent... When

¹⁸ *Zhang Ailing QuANJI* 6, 185)

¹⁹ *Zhang Ailing QuANJI* 6, 185

he became a doctor and put on the clean and sterilized white coat, the father drinking with fried peanuts, the mother listening to Shaoxing opera, and the tacky sisters, would all be kept away from him.

This was the kind of future Ruliang expected. Now, Cynthia was included in his future.²⁰

His desires for the silvery coffee pot and shiny medical equipment are passed on to the Russian girl he is enamored with: Cynthia 沁西亞, the ideal of the foreign woman, the signifier of the best possibilities of life outside China.

Ruliang feels he has known Cynthia even before they meet because her appearance resembles the profile of the face he is used to sketching in books because the profiles he draws never resemble the face of a Chinese. The fact that the profile does not look Chinese, on the one hand, confirms that Ruliang assuages his repulsion of his Chinese fellows by a deluge of fantasies about non-Chinese. On the other, it foretells his encounter with Cynthia, the embodiment of the profile he has been familiar with since his childhood.

Cynthia, the typist working for the principal, is reading a newspaper in the lounge of the school where Ruliang attends. Ruliang recognizes her at first sight:

When her face moved to the other side, all of a sudden, Ruliang was surprised. Her profile was exactly the same one he had been sketching since he was a child.

No wonder that when he registered at school, he felt the

²⁰ Zhang Ailing *Quanji* 6, 190)

Russian woman looked familiar to him [...]. Her yellow hair lost its blonde beauty. Maybe there should be some sunlight to endow it with the pure goldenness belonging to the picture of Saint Mary.²¹

The color of her hair is not as attractively blonde as that of the holy goddess, which foreshadows incompatibility between what Ruliang wants Cynthia to be and what she really is. Ruliang is not aware of the difference yet, as he is overwhelmed by their unexpected encounter. He feels as if they have known each other for decades and their reunion elevates him.

They strike up a conversation when Cynthia notices the profiles on his book, which leads to her assuming that Ruliang has been in love with her for a long time and therefore kept sketching her. The possibility of love brings color to their faces. To develop their relationship, they promise to tutor each other in German and Chinese. The night before their first class, Ruliang soaks himself in the infatuation with Cynthia:

Ruliang did not fall asleep until very late that night. Cynthia... she thought he had a crush on her. It was a misunderstanding... She thought he loved her, and she gave him such a chance to be acquainted with her [...]. She was a capable girl. She worked in a foreign company in the daytime and also had a part-time job at a night school. She was just about the age of his sisters but she was not like them [...]. Maybe he really loved her but he was unaware of it. She had already known it—people said that women were more

²¹ *Zhang Ailing QuANJI* 6, 186

sensitive than men. He felt strange about their encounter. He never believed in destiny, but this was really unusual.²²

When compared with his sisters, Cynthia is obviously superior to them, the former being diligent and competent, the latter wasting their time on cosmetics. Not resorting to destiny, which might bring them together, Ruliang instead credits Cynthia's sensitivity for perceiving their love. The inexplicit feeling that Ruliang has toward Cynthia results from being unaware of the fact that he does not fall in love with Cynthia, but with the reflection of his desires for the foreigners in advertisements and for the scientific authority represented by the coffee pot and the medical equipment.

Ruliang arranges their first date. It is his first step into a world without Chinese. On a winter morning, he puts on his best suit and cycles to Cynthia's:

In Ruliang's belly was the warmly hot breakfast. In Ruliang's heart was overwhelming happiness. It happened quite often that he would feel happy for unknown reasons. But, today, he thought, it must be because of Cynthia. The dogs in the wilderness barked. The bell in the school rang. Strings of golden tinkling bells hung from the cloudless sky. Cynthia had curly yellow hair. Each curl of her hair was like a bell. Lovely Cynthia.²³

The parallel between the "warmly hot breakfast" and the "overwhelming happiness" communicates the physical and spiritual warmth that Ruliang experiences. The sounds of barks and bells prelude his first date with a beautiful foreign woman. The cloudless

²² Zhang Ailing *Quanji* 6, 188-89

²³ Zhang Ailing *Quanji* 6, 189

sky forecasts the sunny day in Ruliang's heart. The golden color of the strings is connected to the acoustic image of tinkling bells, which is then transformed into the visual of Cynthia's "curly yellow hair." On his way to Cynthia, the world around Ruliang becomes eminently satisfying. Ruliang garnishes his first date with fairy fantasies in which his happiness, the fair weather and the pleasant sounds of dogs and bells, are all awarded by Cynthia.

Out of surging eagerness and excitement, Riliang arrives early for their date. However, when he enters her office, his passions wane. His first sight triggers the collapse of his symbolic world:

He paused for a while—she seemed to be a little bit different from the person in his memory. As a matter of fact, he came to know her yesterday, and she should not already be in his memory. It was a short time since he knew her, but he had spent a long time missing her—he thought too much, and his thought became unrealistic. Now he saw a girl of no amazing beauty. Her hair was yellow, but not uniformly. One layer was dark yellow, the other was light yellow, and the one close to the scalp was the greasy colour of chestnut. Maybe she had just finished a simple lunch. When she saw him, she rubbed a paper bag into a ball and threw it to a wastebasket. While she was talking to him, she was also worried whether there were still crumbs on her lips. She kept wiping the corner of her mouth carefully, but was also afraid she would smear her lipstick. Her legs were hidden under the desk. She only wore a pair of flesh-coloured stockings. She took off her high heels, for the sake of comfort. Ruliang sat opposite to her. He would either kick her shoes or her legs, as if she was born with many legs.

He was annoyed, but he at once blamed himself. Why did he

feel dissatisfied with her? Because she took off her shoes in public? She had to sit at the desk for the whole day, and her legs must become numb. No wonder she needed some slovenly time. She was only flesh and blood. She was not the abstract and illusionary dream he dreamed of.²⁴

Cynthia's defects make Ruliang realize she is far from the perfect foreign woman he thirsts for. Not impressively beautiful, she is as plain as his sisters. Moreover, the color of her hair has a yellow tint of greasiness that connects Cynthia to Ruliang's father. The dirty and revolting world of greasiness Ruliang's family indicates overlaps with the orderly and tidy world Cynthia suggests and the gap between them is thus bridged. Throwing away the paper bag carelessly and laying her feet bare in public, Cynthia does not act in accordance with the demure grace that, as far as Ruliang's fantasy is concerned, is inherent in a foreigner's nature. He feels uneasy when sitting opposite to her, as he does not know how to avoid kicking her legs, which is, however, their first physical contact. To avoid being confronted by disillusionment, Ruliang tries to explain away Cynthia's bad manners. However, he cannot deny that she is only a human being. She is not the flawless incarnation of the profile he had created.

Though their first date is a disappointment, their relationship continues. The more Ruliang learns about Cynthia, the more he is disenchanted:

Now Ruliang understood Cynthia more. But he did not want to understand her, because once he knew what kind of person she was, he could not dream about her anymore.

²⁴ *Zhang Ailing Quanji* 6, 191

One time, he brought her a box of snacks. She opened a book and used it as a plate. Pieces of crumbled sugar and walnuts scattered all over the page, but she cared nothing about the mess and just closed the book. He did not like her slovenliness. But he tried his best to ignore it. He would rather notice and memorize the more poetic part of her. He knew he did not love Cynthia. He fell in love for the sake of love.²⁵

Cynthia is no longer the lovely girl with curly hair who will bring into Ruliang's life the pleasant weather, the dulcet barks of dogs and the tinkling sounds of bells. Step by step, she drifts away from the signifier he originally reduced her to and unveils the sloppiness that is large to him but is imperceptible to her. Cynthia is on a par with Ruliang's family in terms of her mediocre appearance, her unrefined manners, and her sordid lifestyle. Although Ruliang indulges himself in the unrealistic part of her and consoles himself with the lingering romance of his fantasy, he cannot help but confess the harrowing truth to himself: he does not love Cynthia, only what she signifies. To be in love with a foreign woman allows him to embark on the fulfilment of his fantasies for an elite life outside China.

Before he proposes to Cynthia, Ruliang is informed of the news of her wedding. Dazed and dumbfounded for a moment, Ruliang still decides to attend the wedding, and get himself drunk in order to drown his sorrows. He cannot have guessed that there would be no wine at the ceremony. What he witnesses, instead, is the most relentless display of the disillusionment of a romantic wedding:

²⁵ *Zhang Ailing Quanji* 6, 193

There were only a few people in the church, but the whole place reeked of rain shoes. A priest put on a cloak that looked like a golden stained carpet. His hair touched his shoulders. It flowed and almost merged with his golden beard. He could not stop sweating. Drops of sweat were dripping from the roots of his hair and beard. He was a tall and good-looking Russian. But his face blushed and swelled, as he could not quit drinking. He was an alcoholic, spoiled by women. He was so sleepy that he could hardly open his eyes. The leader of the chorus who stood beside the priest resembled him in his face and dress. But he was smaller. His voice, however, was loud. He sang and danced with excitement. He pulled his neck straight, the sweat flowing down along it. It was so hot that he had lost all his hair. A wedding assistant came out quietly from the back of the altar. His hands held a salver. He was a suntanned Chinese with a pockmarked face. Under the dark robe that the monks were often dressed in was a pair of white cloth slacks. On his bare feet was a pair of slippers. He also had long hair, dark and greasy. It hung over his cheeks and made him look like a ghost. He was not the ghost from the book of Chinese strange stories, *Liao Zhai*. He was the ghost appearing around the public burial-mounds where the termites crawled in and out.²⁶

Cynthia's world is no longer basked in cheerful charm. Her wedding is like a funeral that transforms the church into a gloomy tomb shrouded by the smell of damp, dirt and sweat. The poetry of the wedding is further devastated by the nonchalant and careless attitudes of the attendants. The priest and the chorus leader are

²⁶ *Zhang Ailing Quanji* 6, 197-98

foreigners without the elegance that glamorizes the movie stars and the models in the advertisements. Moreover, their terrible perspiration fills the church with a sour and foul smell, contrary to the clean and sanitary atmosphere belonging to the silvery coffee pot and the medical equipment which had inspired Ruliang's fantasy about the West. The Chinese assistant has long, dirty, and greasy hair that covers his disgusting, pockmarked face. His appearance functions as a counterpart to the squalor of the priest and the chorus leader. Cynthia is unable to act out her symbolic identity as an impeccable foreign woman. In fact, she is swamped in the same sordidness that Ruliang's family signifies. The distinction between the foreigners and the Chinese disappears. Her wedding serves as an apocalypse that foretells the impending crushing disillusionment.

Shortly after her wedding, Cynthia, in financial straits, asks Ruliang to find some part-time jobs for her. But then she falls ill and just barely survives typhoid fever. When Ruliang comes to visit her, she lies in bed, half-conscious:

Her jaw and neck were thin to the extreme. They were like the pit of a candied date drained of juice. The pit was only clothed with a thin skin of pulp. But he could still recognize her profile. It did not change a lot. It was the same line from the corner of the forehead to the jaw, the line that Ruliang could draw by instinct. From then on, Ruliang never sketched in his books. Now, they were very clean all the time.²⁷

The final passage of the story reminds us of the beginning where

²⁷ *Zhang Ailing QuANJI* 6, 199

the profile drawn by Ruliang's left hand is described as looking like a person who has "just survived a severe illness."²⁸ In doing so, the story starts with an implicit foreshadowing of the disillusionment Ruliang will suffer when his dream for the foreign world that once enriched his life like a juicy fruit has shrunk into a pit.

In this story, as in two of Zhang's essays, there is an opposition between China and the West, respectively bearing the symbols of repulsive hopelessness and exhilarating hopefulness. In the knowledge that the factual existences of Ruliang's family and Cynthia become nothing other than the signifiers that found their subjectivities, we can then move on to identify Ruliang's "objectively subjective fantasy," which turns out to be similar to that of the author: life in a foreign land where he can be purged of vulgarity and mediocrity, realize his potential, and stand out as someone adorned with enviable eminence and achievement that his Chinese compatriots can never emulate. The world that boasts of its advanced science and medicine, no matter how objectively real it seems to Ruliang, is merely his wishful fantasy. The image of the emaciated Cynthia is an epiphany that discloses the plain truth that the angelic foreign woman who he hopes can levitate him to the splendid heaven Western civilization is bracketed with never exists. Nor does the better life he chases in the world outside of China. His incremental awareness of how he fantasizes reality finally leads him to disillusionment while it also exposes to us our "unknown knowns," "the disavowed beliefs and suppositions we are not even aware of adhering to ourselves, but which nonetheless determine our acts and feelings."²⁹ It is not the possibility of materializing what we fantasize that keeps out fantasies alive. On the contrary, it is exactly the nonexistence of what we fantasize that immortalizes

²⁸ *Zhang Ailing Quanji* 6, 184

²⁹ *How to Read Lacan* 52

it. Only when our fantasies in no circumstances can be proved false can we continue to be deluded in an objectively subjective reality. It is this brutal confrontation with the “unknown knowns” that deprives Ruliang of the instinctive skill of sketching, his instinctive skill of fantasizing.

The study of the contrastive signifiers China and the West are conferred in Zhang’s autobiographical essays and in one of her short stories as well as the exploration of the “objectively subjective fantasy” Zhang and her character shares subsequently channel our attention to C.T. Hsia’s remarks about modern Chinese writers’ obsession with China where, again, we can tell that what China symbolizes is the inverse of the West.

Modern Chinese Writers’ Obsession with China

In his essay “Obsession with China: The Moral Burden of Modern Chinese Literature,” C. T. Hsia deals with the obsessive concerns about China that are ingrained in the works of most modern Chinese writers. He argues that all the major writers of this modern phase—between the traditional Chinese literature that precedes it and the Communist literature that immediately follows—“are enkindled with this patriotic passion,” which derives from their reflection of “China as a nation afflicted with a spiritual disease and therefore unable to strengthen itself or change its set ways of inhumanity.”³⁰ Accordingly, the obsession with China that haunts modern Chinese writers registers the Chinese intellectual’s worry about the decline of the nation, “a new self-awareness brought about by the long series of defeats and humiliations they have

³⁰ Hsia 533-34

suffered since the mid-nineteenth century.” Moreover, it also betrays their pressing attentions to humanitarianism as they denounce “the shame” that has been “visited upon” China due to its “moral bankruptcy, its callous unconcern with human dignity and human suffering.”³¹

Modern Chinese writers share the disgust of the degradation of their countries with their Western contemporaries. This does not put them “in the mainstream of modern literature,”³² because, as Hsia points out, the failure of the Chinese writers to earn international applause also hinges on their obsession with China. When the Western writer “automatically identifies the sick states of his country with the state of man in the modern world,” the Chinese writer, though also probing the “spiritual sickness” of his country, does not extend his vision beyond China. “The Chinese writer sees the conditions of China as peculiarly Chinese and not applicable elsewhere.”³³ The limit of his vision determines the limit of his achievements. Denied the laurel of universally renowned authors, the Chinese writer is also blamed for a conceptual mistake. While he “spares no pains to depict its squalor and corruption, [he] leaves the door open for hope, for the importation of modern Western or Soviet ideas and systems that would transform his country from its present state of decadence.”³⁴ In other words, his reluctance to “equate the Chinese scene with the condition of modern man”³⁵ is nourished by his fantasy about the power of Western civilization. Therefore, to repudiate the validity and efficaciousness of practicing the modern Western systems “would

³¹ Hsia 534

³² Hsia 536

³³ Hsia 536

³⁴ Hsia 536

³⁵ Hsia 536

have blotted out hope for the betterment of life, for restoration of human dignity.” As a result, “the price he pays for his obsession with China is therefore a certain patriotic provinciality and a naiveté of faith with regard to better conditions elsewhere.”³⁶

The obsession with China makes the hope for “a wealthy, strong, democratic, and technologically armed China”³⁷ surge in the heart of modern Chinese writers. The fear of the imminent downfall of China and the intense expectation for the improvement of the country through Western means cause Chinese writers from the late Qing period to the early Republican years to relentlessly expose and ruthlessly castigate the dark side of Chinese culture. Their burlesque stories that satirize and reproach the squalid Chinese and the rotten Chinese civilization are the “self-examination” of the “paralytic condition of China.” Furthermore, they are suggestive of the writers’ “passion for human dignity and freedom.”³⁸ Their steadfast faith in humanity, on the one hand, allows modern Chinese writers to “partake of the modern spirit”³⁹ that accuses the modern world of its impersonal environment. On the other, it fortifies the “indictment,” made by two of the most influential Chinese writers, Lu Xun 魯迅 and Lao She 老舍, “of China as a cannibalistic society.”⁴⁰ What is implied here is that the writer’s quest and request for humanitarianism contribute to their literary accomplishments but also lead to their disdain and detestation of China.

If we examine Hsia’s article further, we can find that his exegesis of

³⁶ Hsia 536

³⁷ Hsia 535

³⁸ Hsia 543

³⁹ Hsia 554

⁴⁰ Hsia 545

modern Chinese writers' obsession with China lays bare not only these writers' obsession with the West but, more significantly, his own obsession with the West. This frame of mind comes into being because they believe that the West is politically, economically, and intellectually superior to China. This is the "objectively subjective fantasy" that Hsia harbors and, ironically, accuses modern Chinese writers of harboring. Compared with the dilapidated and corrupted China, white supremacy rings objectively true to them. Hence, the hope for eradicating the disease of China is pinned on drawing on the experiences of Western modernization. In like manner, Hsia asserts that if modern Chinese writers dare to "equate the Chinese scene with the condition of modern man" and consume themselves "with the passion of Dostoevsky or Tolstoy, of Conrad or Mann, to probe the illness of modern civilization," they would have already "been in the mainstream of modern literature,"⁴¹ statements that set Western literature as good models for Chinese writers to copy.

But the antithesis between China and the West denotes more than just the habitual mind-set of Hsia and these modern Chinese writers when they evaluate China's success or failure by Western standards. It drives us to enquire: if the dominant status of Western ideas and systems is but another subjective fantasy, what are the "unknown knows" they are reluctant to face? To answer this question, we need to discover what their "real" desires are. As Žižek comments:

However, the thing to add...is that the desire staged in fantasy is not the subject's own, but the *other's* desire, the desire of those around me with whom I interact: fantasy, the phantasmatic scene or scenario, is an answer to: 'You're saying

⁴¹ Hsia 536

this, but *what is it that you actually want by saying it?* The original question of desire is not directly ‘What do I want?’, but ‘What do *others* want from me? What do they see in me? What am I for those others?’...at its most fundamental, fantasy tells me what I am for my others.⁴² [emphasis in the original]

Accordingly, a person’s desire is defined in relation to the desire of people around him. However, if one thing must be defined by another, it does not have its own identity or substance. Therefore, when China, its glory or decadence, is defined by the Western standards, the Chinese-ness does not exist. By the same token, when the West is defined by the backwardness of China, its superiority and ascendancy never exist. On this account, what Hsia and the modern Chinese writers he denounces both yearn for can never be factual reality. It is merely nothingness. Nonetheless, Žižek’s words also make us realize that fantasy helps us form an identity that will make us the object of others’ desires. It is this point that unveils the “unknown knowns” of Hsia and the Chinese writers put on his list: they make themselves the object of the desire of the West by being ready to prostrate themselves to whatever the West signifies. Even if this delusive assumption of the West--instead of renovating China and steering Chinese literature to the world stage--might just justify the West’s desire for colonizing China geographically, and for colonizing the Chinese mentally, they cannot desist from desiring and fantasizing because no one can live without having something to be identified with in order to be desired.

If we go back to Zhang Ailing’s writing to reason why she falls

⁴² *How to Read Lacan* 48-9

outside of the category of Hsia's account, the answer we can come up with is that it is not because she has never been obsessed with the West but because she is able to debunk fantasy camouflaged as reality. Rarely evincing the "peculiar interest for [...] obsessive patriotism"⁴³ that motivates many of her contemporaries to lash out at the vileness of Chinese culture, Zhang often finds her works liable to criticism for being nothing more than exposés of the depravity of the Chinese. Her portrayal and mocking of the negative mentality of the Chinese does not induce her to dwell upon the promise of western civilization and take it as the panacea for China's spiritual illness. In Zhang's stories, the Oriental and the Occidental bear the same weight of deficiencies, absurdities, and frustrations. Impervious to the sentimental passion for patriotism and immune from the fanciful worship for Western civilization, Zhang matter-of-factly points out that not only are our desires not our own but that what our fantasies galvanize us to chase is simply a nonentity. It is this unyielding nihilism that enables Zhang to disenchant the Orient and the Occident to which we are allured by their fictitious luster.

But can we stop chasing nothingness? Again, Žižek's perception of Lacan comes to our assistance here. In his book, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan Through Popular Culture*, Žižek recites a story about how the mystery of a black house deeply enchanting to people in a small village is de-mythologized by a young engineer coming from outside. The story is how people react at the moment of disillusionment. After the engineer declares that the house is nothing but an ordinary ruin, the men in the village who harbor the fantasy for a long time feel irritated:

⁴³ Hsia 534

The men are horrified when the engineer begins to leave, one of them wildly attacks him. The engineer unfortunately falls to the ground and soon afterwards dies. Why were the men so horrified by the action of the newcomer? We can grasp their resentment by remarking the difference between reality and the “other scene” of the fantasy space: the “black house” was forbidden to the men because it functioned as an empty space wherein they could project their nostalgic desires, their distorted memories; by publicly stating that the “black house” was nothing but an old ruin, the young intruder reduced their fantasy space to everyday, common reality. He annulled the difference between reality and fantasy space, depriving the men of the place in which they were able to articulate their desires.⁴⁴

Denied access to playing out their fantasies, the men burst into a fit of indignation and murder the person who wakens them up from the dream that seems to them objectively real. The brutality conveys the message that, without fantasy, to witness “everyday, common reality” is so unbearable that it may instigate violence and crimes. To kill is better than to be deprived of “the very fundamental fantasy that regulate the universe of his (self-) experience.”⁴⁵ The kernel of fantasy is hope; it is the hope for something better than the present and hope for achieving it. No one can live without “the hopes that cut us off from life. We are both poisoned and nourished by the act of hope itself.”⁴⁶ This is how life mocks our hopes, because “one of the things that destroy” our “chances of happiness is” our “hopes of achieving it.” We all

⁴⁴ Žižek 8-9

⁴⁵ *How to Read Lacan* 53

⁴⁶ Frayn XVI

live in our “various hypothetical futures”⁴⁷ that consist of nothing but our delusive fantasies.

In one of her earliest published works, “Tiancai Meng” 天才夢 (Dream of Genius), Zhang gave birth to one of her most memorable sentences. When lamenting over the conflict between her talent in writing and her inefficiency in dealing with chores, she ends this short essay with the following witticism: “Life is a gorgeous gown, swarming with lice.”⁴⁸ Zhang’s precocious intelligence contributes to this augural remark of her lifelong struggles for reconciling the promises of life, materialized as “a gorgeous gown” that appeals to her with its sordid reality, insinuated by a swarm of lice that harrows her. Although the “lice” is used as a metaphor by Zhang to describe her ineptness of handling the most common daily trifles, I think we should allow a more liberal interpretation here. If “the gorgeous gown” is the emblem of the most exhilarating possibility of life fantasy entices us to entertain, the “lice” allude to the undertow of the intrinsic void of fantasy that counterbalances its bright promises. The paradoxical coexistence of “the gorgeous gown” and the “lice” represents the irresolvable contradiction between fantasy and its nothingness. This is Zhang Ailing’s way of telling us that if we do not want to sink into total despair as Ruliang does, we have to keep chasing a phantasmatic reality while struggling to stave off the lice that constantly gnaw at us to confront us with the eerie truth: what we persist in chasing during our lifetime is nothing but nothingness.

⁴⁷ Frayn XV

⁴⁸ Zhang Dream of Genius 27