

ZHANG AILING

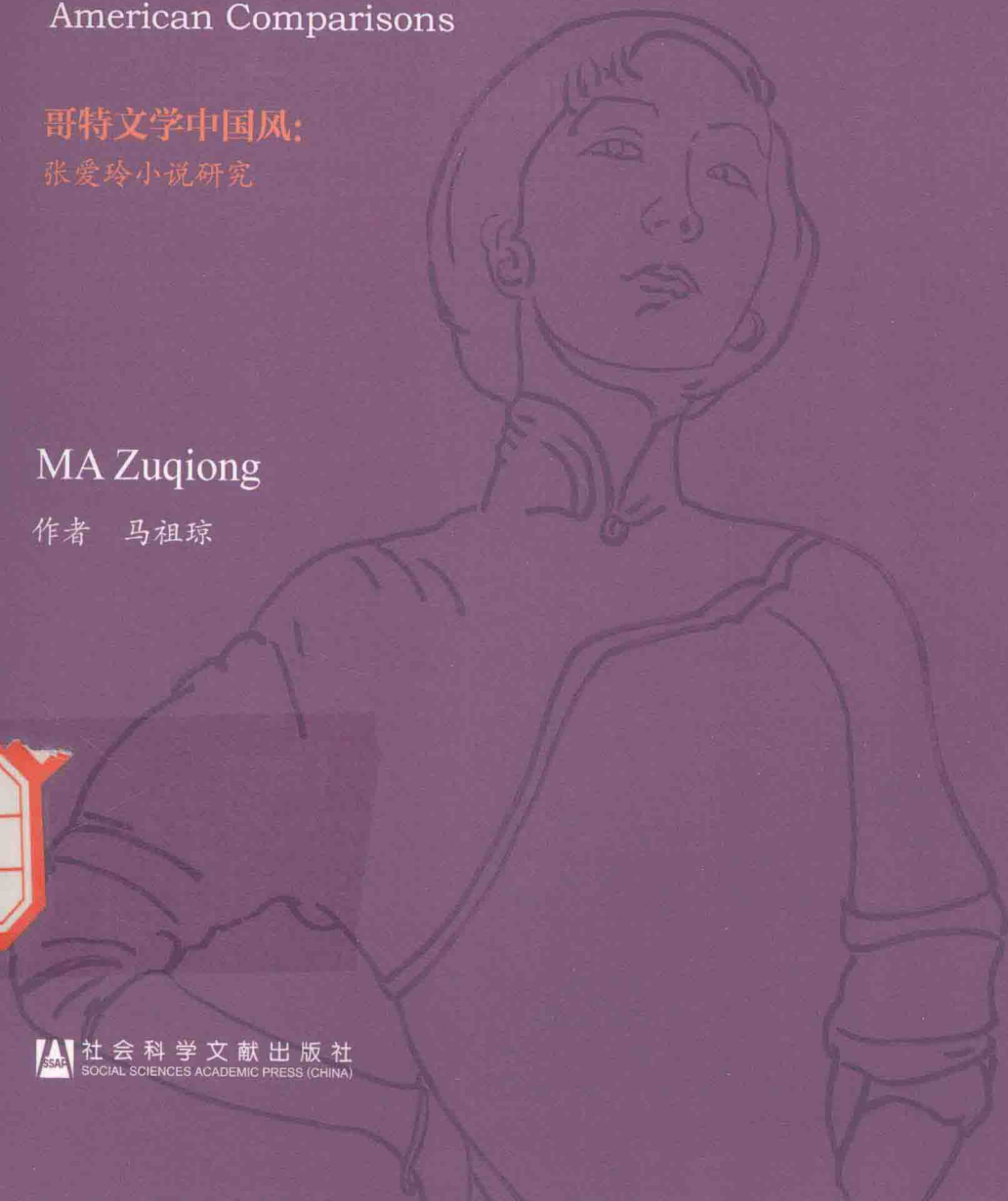
Gothic Fiction, Chinese Style

Zhang Ailing's *Chuanqi* with
American Comparisons

哥特文学中国风：
张爱玲小说研究

MA Zuqiong

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by Zuqiong Ma

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PREFACE

This study seeks to situate our understanding of Zhang Ailing's *Chuanqi* as part of global women's efforts to establish a voice of their own by creating a unique form of literary writing. In order to show Zhang Ailing as a conscious weaver of Gothic fiction, Chinese style, my study pursues two parallel routes of argument.

First, proceeding from Zhang's vision of human experience as an interplay of the ordinary and the extra-ordinary, my research delineates her indebtedness to and rebellion against traditional Chinese "Gothic," especially the genre of *chuanqi*. To illuminate the common *raison d'être* of Zhang's modern romances in her collection *Chuanqi* and its namesake traditional genre, my study bypasses the historicity and cultural specificity of Western Gothic to put forward a definition of "Gothic" that can accommodate Chinese particularities. Second, to demonstrate the general comparability between Zhang's creative imagination and that of widely recognized female Gothicists, this study engages in close textual analysis of a broad spectrum of Zhang's stories on the one hand and on the other representative works by Zhang's American contemporaries, Eudora Welty and Carson McCullers. Focusing on three leitmotifs of female Gothic—the female grotesque, confinement, and escape, my comparative approach generates differences as well as similarities between Chinese and American female Gothic. On a theoretical level, my study has broadened the horizon of female Gothic from the West to the East, demonstrating its power as a vibrant literary form.

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My deepest gratitude goes to my better half, Fang Qiang, who has lived with the haughtiness and sophistry, the swings and tantrums of a pedantic woman and loved her. Equally important, to my dear parents Ma Yunwu and Fan Linggui, who have always loved and believed in me, I owe debts beyond measure.

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I INTRODUCTION

Gothic, in the literary context, originally refers to a seemingly homogeneous group of novels written between the 1760s and the 1820s in England and somewhat refractively in America. They are characterized by an obsession with the terrifying, a real or imagined presence of the supernatural, archaic/primitive settings, highly stereotyped characters, and the techniques of literary suspense (Punter 1). What started as a term of clear-cut scope has accumulated a nebula of usages over the past two centuries. Many modern and contemporary literary texts only tangentially related to the “original Gothic” are stamped “Gothic” nevertheless, because they deal with the most basic human instincts of fear and anxiety and they deploy the literary devices that Gothic literature honed to perfection to induce those psychic states.^①

One of the most important bifurcations/variations of the genre is perhaps “female Gothic,” which generally refers to female-authored works that incorporate and reconfigure stylistic and/or thematic elements of the Gothic. It claims a prominent lineage from Ann Radcliffe and Mary Shelley to the Brontës and to American writers such as Eudora Welty and Carson

① Gothic scholars often note what seems to be the discursive imprecision the term “Gothic” has suffered in literary critical history. Two works come readily to mind that open with a discussion of the eclectic range of the literary designation: Jarlath Killeen’s *Gothic Literature 1825-1914*, 1-3, and David Punter’s *The Literature of Terror*, 2-4.

McCullers.^① (The last two writers will be considered at length in my study.) Since Ellen Moers first proposed the differentiation of the female from the male tradition, feminist critics have tended to view female Gothic as an independent form with peculiar ideological and aesthetic imports. In fact, a significant breakthrough of Western Gothic studies in the twentieth century occurs precisely in the field of gender and genre. The concept of “female Gothic” not only marks the introduction of gendered perspective into Gothic studies, but also opens up a new space for feminist literary studies. Moers coins the term “female Gothic” in *Literary Women* to denote a powerful literary form initiated by Ann Radcliffe that turns the passive Gothic heroine into an active subject that travels, explores, makes and owns (90-140). Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Claire Kahane, Julian E. Fleenor, Elaine Showalter and other feminist critics take Moers’s proposition as a point of departure, recovering and reevaluating buried or marginalized texts of female Gothic, and revealing/reenacting their potential in subverting patriarchal literary tradition(s) in Europe and America.

Although these critics’ works have contributed to a Western understanding of Gothic literature and comprised a main thrust of the feminist literary revolution from the 1970s onward, very few critics have turned their eyes towards the East. This study seeks to take current female Gothic criticism beyond its Eurocentric (Anglo-American centric) field of vision and examine Zhang Ailing (Eileen Chang 张爱玲, 1920-1995), a woman writer active in the Shanghai literary scene in the 1940s, as a conscious weaver of female Gothic tales. I suggest that Zhang refigures what I call the Chinese Gothic tradition and, in doing so,

① Eudora Welty is not canonically considered a female Gothic writer, not even a Gothic writer according to herself. Nevertheless, many scholars have discussed the unmistakably Gothic elements in her work and her relation, if not allegiance, to female Gothic. Most notably, Ruth Weston, in *Gothic Traditions and Narrative Techniques in the Fiction of Eudora Welty*, presents a book-length study of Welty’s adoption and adaptation of both English and American Gothic traditions to explore female psychic development and imagine possibilities of female liberation. Because my definition of female Gothic qualifies everything as such that marries feminist tendencies, conscious or not, with Gothic narrative strategies, Eudora Welty will definitely be seen as a writer of female Gothic.

subverts its patriarchal and misogynistic orientation.^① Her refashioning of the Chinese traditional Gothic, in its feminist impulse, calls for comparison with the way in which recognized Western female Gothicists such as Eudora Welty and Carson McCullers in the American South reclaimed the Gothic for the exploration and affirmation of female subjectivity and selfhood. In this study, I will illuminate how both Zhang and her American counterparts make effective use of female Gothic motifs, including the female grotesque, confinement, and escape, to question the patriarchal hegemonies of their historical times.

To study Zhang as a Chinese female Gothicist simultaneously offers a reassessment of Zhang's literary achievement as a modernist endeavor to make old traditions new, and negotiates a place for Zhang in the global women's movement, of which the effort to establish a voice of their own through writing is an integral part. Furthermore, the cross-cultural comparative approach of this project extends the horizon of female Gothic as a vibrant feminist literary form from the West to the East and, in so doing, changes the face of female Gothic. As much as patriarchal "othering" of femininity and its effects on the female psyche is trans-cultural, the shapes of female "monstrosity," forms of social oppression, and routes of escape as imagined in the stories of Zhang and her American counterparts are molded and mediated by culture-specific parameters such as aesthetics, literary conventions, and the social/historical context of literary production. By putting Zhang on the map of female Gothic literature, this study (1) challenges current theories on the Gothic to expand so as to highlight transcontinental commonalities *and* accommodate cultural differences, and (2) creates an interaction of the literary imagination across the globe, which not only enables us to identify new areas of exploration in the East but also re-news

① By the "Chinese Gothic tradition," I refer to the Chinese weird fiction, also called "literature of the strange," which comprises two loosely sequential subgenres—*zhiguai* and *chuanqi*—and dates back to the Six Dynasties (220-589). I will defer to Chapter Two the detailed discussion of Chinese weird fictions, their accommodation under an extended concept of "Gothic," and their refashioning by Zhang Ailing in her stories.

our understanding of the “old” established corpus of female Gothic in the West, namely, in this study, stories by Eudora Welty and Carson McCullers.

I have chosen female Gothic writers in the American South because I think certain historical/cultural parallels between Zhang’s China and the American South furnish an *a priori* overall comparability in their literary imagination. Both places had been traumatized by war and a measure of colonization. Although unlike China the South in the 1940s had no war on its soil, the specter of the Civil War still haunted its imagination, and its legacy of racial violence was boiling up and over. More importantly, both locales had in place a more stringent and entrenched form of gender subordination. Although substantial progress in women’s liberation had been gained in both places by 1940, the family-community remained a powerful oppressive apparatus and a locus of real and imaginary conflicts for China and the American South.

Because Zhang’s most prolific years were arguably the 1940s, I will only concern myself with fictions written by the three writers before 1950. As a matter of fact, 1940-1950 marked a period of intense productivity for all three writers. Most of Zhang’s fictional works, especially her first and only collection of stories *Chuanqi* and its expanded edition, appeared in this period.^① After her move to Hong Kong and then

① Zhang’s *Chuanqi* 传奇 was first published in 1944, consisting of ten short stories and novellas: “The Golden Cangue” 金锁记 (Jinsuoji), “Love in a Fallen City” 倾城之恋 (Qingcheng zhi lian), “Jasmine Tea” 茉莉香片 (Moli xiangpian), “Aloewood Incense: The First Brazier” 沉香屑：第一炉香 (Chenxiangxue: diyilu xiang), “Aloewood Incense: The Second Brazier” 沉香屑：第二炉香 (Chenxiangxue: dierlu xiang), “The Gilded Tiles” 琉璃瓦 (Liuli wa), “The Heart Sutra” 心经 (Xinjing), “When We Were Young” 年轻的时候 (Nianqingde shihou), “A Withered Flower” 花凋 (Huadiao), and “Sealed Off” 封锁 (Fengsuo). The expanded edition of *Chuanqi* was published in 1946, which reprinted all of the ten stories that appeared in the first edition and added the following five stories: “Traces of Love” 留情 (Liuqing), “Great Felicity” 鸿鸾喜 (Hongyuanxi), “Red Rose, White Rose” 红玫瑰与白玫瑰 (Hongmeigui yu baimeigui), “Waiting” 等 (Deng), and “Steamed Osmanthus Flower: Ah Xiao’s Unhappy Autumn” 桂花蒸：阿小悲秋. As Zhang notes in her preface to the expanded edition “A Few Words to Say to My Readers” 有几句话同读者说 (You jiju hua tong duzhe shuo), these five additions had appeared in magazines and Zhang revised them for inclusion into the 1946 edition of *Chuanqi* (460). See *A Selective Guide to Chinese Literature 1900-1949*, vol. 2, 266-267, for a list of the stories included in the first edition of *Chuanqi*. See also *Selected Works of Zhang Ailing* 张爱玲精选集 (Zhang Ailing jingxuanji), 310-313, for a chronologically ordered list of Zhang’s fictional and non-fictional works.

emigration to the United States in the early 1950s, her energy was largely diverted to literary criticism and translation. Carson McCullers had a spurt of creativity in the 1940s, publishing all except one of her novels as well as writing the vast majority of her stories. She spent most of her time adapting her works to the stage and screen after 1950 and before her untimely death in 1967.^① Although Eudora Welty's creative career kept evolving even into the twenty-first century, her first three collections of stories and her first two novels were published in the 1940s.^②

This study is inspired by David Punter's ground-breaking, albeit overlooked and thus to date the only, experiment with the Gothic as an analytical apparatus to probe in depth literary imagination in modern China. In 1998, ten years after offering the first historicized treatment of Gothic fiction as serious literature in his seminal work *The Literature of Terror*, Punter devoted an entire chapter of his second major publication on the Gothic, *Gothic Pathologies*, to the Gothic interpretation of a novella written in the 1980s, "King of Singers" 寻找歌王 (Xunzhao gewang), by Liu Suola, a Chinese woman musician, vocalist and writer.^③ The story is narrated in the first person by the female protagonist who accompanies her composer boyfriend on a quest for the title character, a fabled demigod of music. As the demigod is said to dwell in the misty and mythicized mountains of the South, the urbanites go on a pilgrimage that takes them through a malignant landscape of forests and cliffs. They are molested by leeches and maggots, misguided by spirit-like villagers (or villager-like spirits, depending on the interpretation), wounded by a revengeful tree demon, and above all haunted and propelled by a variety of

① The novels and stories McCullers published in the 1940s include *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* (1940), *The Ballad of the Sad Café* (1941), and *The Member of the Wedding* (1946). See Carson McCullers *Complete Novels*, 807-819, for a complete chronology of McCullers's life and works.

② The three collections of stories that Welty published in the 1940s are *A Curtain of Green* (1941), *The Wide Net and Other Stories* (1943), and *The Golden Apples* (1949). Her first novel, *The Robber Bridegroom*, was published in 1942. Her second novel, *Delta Wedding*, was serialized in *Atlantic Monthly* (Jan.-April 1946) and then came out as a book in the same year. See *Eudora Welty Complete Novels*, 995-1003, for a complete chronology of Welty's life and works.

③ I am following Harvard-Yenching style to cite Chinese sources—with one modification. Instead of putting English translations in parenthesis, I am putting the translations in quotation marks or italics and the *pinyin* Romanization of Chinese characters in parenthesis.

grotesque/fantastic figures who are possibly incarnates of the demigod.

Punter shows an extraordinary clarity of vision in recognizing the wide range of Gothic motifs deployed in the narrative: sublimity, split personality, questioning of the boundaries of reality, delusion and dream, etc. He is also keen to the sociocultural causes behind Liu's Gothicism, for, not unlike Western Gothic, "King of Singers" deals with the psychic pains of disorientation and alienation typically symptomatic of a fast-transitioning society. However, Punter fails to address Liu's own cultural heritage, despite the fact that the Chinese Gothic tradition, which predated the first vogue of Gothic in Europe (between 1750-1820) by more than a millennium, comprises a major part of the literary heritage for modern Chinese writers. Even more importantly, Punter fails to see "King of Singers" as *female* Gothic and is therefore blind to a deeper meaning of the text—a vital concern with the relationship between womanhood and art. The story, which is, ostensibly, the rememberings of the composer boyfriend B and *his* quest for artistic purity and spiritual transcendence, is actually, I contend, the narrator-female protagonist's tortured and perhaps unsuccessful (certainly inconclusive) effort to cross the culturally constructed impasse between womanhood and artistic transcendence.^①

① My main contention is that "King of Singers" is better read as the female protagonist's psychic journey in pursuit of selfhood. After all, the novella has no other narrator but the female protagonist. The journey she feels "obliged" to undertake out of her duty as girlfriend in the mountains is told as *her* story after she comes back to the city alone. If her boyfriend B is the *prima mobile* of the story, she is the one to bring the story back. As the sole story-teller, her authority is absolute and her subjectivity dominant to the exclusion of B's interiority. The inhospitable mountain and its demonic plants and creatures are as much her mindscape as the actual landscape. (For instance, the mountain insects annoy her so because they ridicule her over-sanitized urban womanhood.) More importantly, she is also an aspirant musician who is no less tantalized by the possibility of artistic transcendence than B. If the King of Singers is the spiritual/transcendental double of B, the King and the boyfriend can both be projections of her own longing for an art that flows like mountain air free and above the commercialization and contamination of the city. Note that "King of Singers" might as well be "Queen of Singers," because the original Chinese title does not disclose the gender of the demigod. Finally, the narrative does not end with her adventures in the mountains but literally starts (to be told) after she gets out of there. Her memory of her and B's adventures in the wilderness comes in scattered flashbacks in her (continued and solitary) journey in the city, dressed as if she was a mountaineer when the terrain she is traversing is only the paradoxically unfamiliar and boring cityscape. In this sense, B's quest is only the off-stage prelude to the female protagonist's search for selfhood.

A salient specimen of female Gothic as “King of Singers” is, it cannot be the only manifestation of its kind. Liu Suola does not represent the first Chinese writer of female Gothic, nor is she the most concentrated or self-conscious for that matter. This study does not attempt to locate the first female Gothic writer in history, because the identification of the starting point of Chinese female Gothic is a worthy and challenging task that demands further research. However, it is my scholarly project to trace the possible Chinese lineage of female Gothic back a few decades from Liu Suola in the 1980s to Zhang Ailing in the 1940s.^① My

① It is interesting to note that texts of the “original” Gothic were translated and introduced into China as of 1910 as part of a deluge of imported Western thinking and civilization, and these translations inspired and informed the supernatural or uncanny elements in the work of a number of Shanghai-based writers in the 1930s and 1940s, in certain cases as much as the Chinese indigenous literature of the strange.

According to Yu Jing’s study of the influence of Anglo-American Gothic fiction on modern Chinese literature, the earliest written accounts of eighteenth-century English Gothic fiction are found in histories of English literature translated from English or authored in Chinese by Chinese literary scholars between 1920-1940. In addition, between 1919-1949, a great number of Gothic novels were translated and published in Chinese, including *She* by Henry Rider Haggard (74-5). In the same article, Yu also posits that while elements of traditional *zhiguai* are incorporated into fictions written between 1930-40 by writers such as Ye Lingfeng, Xu Xuan and Shi Zhecun, it is clear that the traditional fantastic was reshaped by the deluge of Western fiction that flooded China in the Post-May Fourth era (76). Leo Ou-fan Lee in *Shanghai Modern* devotes a whole chapter to analyzing the fantastic/uncanny aspect of Shi Zhecun’s stories. With evidence gained from both textual analysis and interviews with the Shanghai-based writer, Lee argues convincingly that Western Gothic fictions (including Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher,” Henry James’s “The Turn of the Screw,” Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu’s *Strange Tales*, etc.), as well as *zhiguai* and the more popular strains of Buddhism and Daoism, provided the literary background for Shi’s creative imagination (177-179). Lee also speculates that, by grafting elements of Western works of supernaturalism onto the Chinese rural and urban landscapes, Shi consciously sought “a new fictional path to the supernatural by way of some minor Western ‘ghost writers’” (180). In addition, see Zhang Jingyuan’s *Psychoanalysis in China* (113-4) for an analysis of Shi’s “The Magic Track” 魔道 (Mo dao) as a parody of Henry James’s “The Turn of the Screw.”

As roughly a contemporary of all the above mentioned Chinese writers, Zhang Ailing was exposed to the same fusion of indigenous and foreign fantasies. Since the influence of the Western Gothic imagination on Zhang and possible intertextuality between the works of Anglo-American Gothic writers and Zhang deserves totally another book, and because I will engage mainly in parallel rather than influence study, I will not explore the scope or depth of Zhang’s indebtedness to Western Gothic except mentioning the names of Gothic writers that came under Zhang’s attention.

study of Zhang's fiction follows Punter's pioneering effort to dissect the psychic tension of modern Chinese literature with the concept of the Gothic, but seeks to avoid the pitfalls of uprooting Chinese modern Gothic from its rich legacy and ignoring its gendered meanings. Therefore, I will address Zhang's affinities to and departures from traditional Chinese Gothic in Chapter Two and devote Chapters Three through Five to a comparison of Zhang's works with those of Welty and McCullers, each dealing with a motif central to female Gothic.

Chapter Two starts with an account of Zhang Ailing's personal history. It then addresses the definition of Gothic and "Gothic" forms in the Chinese literary tradition, i.e., *zhiguai* and *chuanqi*. The greatest portion of the chapter is devoted to teasing out Zhang's indebtedness to and departures from traditional Chinese Gothic.

Chapter Three examines the similarities and differences in the use of female grotesque between Zhang and the American writers. It starts with the definition of the grotesque and the female grotesque and then contextualizes the female grotesque against the two cultures' delineations of ideal womanhood. I suggest that Welty, McCullers and Zhang have all created transgressive grotesques, i.e., women whose transgressions of patriarchal restrictions are concretized as physical repulsiveness. However, while female ugliness in Welty and McCullers' stories is routinely embodied as extra weight and plus size, it is manifested in a wider range of bodily anomalies in Zhang's work, not excluding atrophy and emaciation. In addition, in Zhang's texts, not only rule breakers are appalling, conformists are equally repugnant.

Chapter Four looks at another leitmotif in female Gothic—confinement. Welty, McCullers, and Zhang all use domestic spaces to spatialize and materialize the power dynamics and psychic forces that define but also entangle and entrap women's existence. Like her American counterparts, Zhang frequently employs structures and spaces extraneous to the physical body, including houses, rooms and indoor paraphernalia. But she also makes extensive use of "small" intimate

“bodily” spaces created by women’s jewelry and clothing. More significantly, whereas the American writers mainly express a concern with the “cornering” of the increasingly assertive and visible manless women (women without men), Zhang, whose imagination was shaped by the socio-economic realities of her place and time, treats primarily the entrapment of women in patriarchal heterosexual/marital relations.

Chapter Five goes beyond the exposition of the limiting and frequently debilitating effects of patriarchal containment and control on women’s lives to explore possibilities of escape. Zhang, Welty, and McCullers all use the character of the Gothic *picara*, i.e., the female form of the picaresque figure, as initiated by Radcliffe to explore possibilities of women’s escape from the confinement of patriarchal gender roles.^① However, whereas the American writers bring their protagonists’ travel to an uplifting, albeit inconclusive, ending, Zhang posits that escape is only possible in the most vulnerable moments of patriarchal society. Furthermore, in contrast to American writers’ “failure” to imagine inter-gender reconciliation and understanding, Zhang materializes egalitarian heterosexual relationships in face of the equalizing force of war, although they inevitably end as soon as (patriarchal) order is restored.

① See Moers 122-140 for a detailed analysis of what Moers sees as “traveling heroinism” in Radcliffe’s fiction. The term describes the female protagonists, who, persecuted by a male villain, is pushed to traverse perilous outdoor or indoor territories and perform extraordinary feats of courage and strength.

II REINVENTION OF TRADITIONAL CHINESE “GOTHIC”

Zhang was born in 1920 into an aristocratic family in Shanghai. There is no doubt she was born into a most extraordinary time and place. Nineteen years before, China dethroned its last emperor and instituted the first modern government in its history. Decades before this institutional entry into modernity, Chinese *wenren* 文人 (students/scholars of Confucian texts and practitioners of Confucian doctrines) had already made it a life-or-death undertaking to reinvent the nation in the image of the West, the epitome of modern economy, polity and culture in the Chinese eye. Most representative of the rejuvenating efforts is perhaps the abolition in 1905 of the imperial examination. Lasting over 1300 years, the examination had been the major vehicle of enacting and reinforcing classical learning. Although the structure of degrees and titles was to continue as before, the path to their acquisition was now to be through new schools and new learning. The shift represents an uncritical substitution of Western for classical standards. A few years after the founding of the Republic of China in 1915, in the face of Japanese encroachment on China, young intellectuals, inspired by *New Youth* 新青年 (*Xin qingnian*), a monthly magazine edited by the iconoclastic intellectual revolutionary Chen Duxiu, began agitating for the reform and modernization of Chinese society. As part of this new culture movement, they