論　著

Between History and Literature: Chang Ai-ling's 張愛玲 Lao Tai-tai 老太太 Characters

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Introduction

Following her long fame in Taiwan since the late 1960s, Chang Ai-ling has fast become a familiar name within the last decade, both in the West and in mainland China. In her recent book, *Woman and Chinese Modernity*, Rey Chow makes an interesting observation about Chang Ai-ling's works:

> she remains to this day a writer who is generally popular with fiction readers, but whose historical and social significance remains largely neglected except by critics who valorize or criticize her for what they consider to be her portrayals of "human nature." In spite of this, the opposition her work poses to modern Chinese

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> literary history has not ceased doubling itself in important ways–in the uneasy relation between history and literary writing, between historical criticism and formal textual analysis. Any attempt to understand these relations must take seriously the tension with the "historical" that Chang's writings produce. (Chow 120)

In this same spirit, this paper traces the tenuous line between what is usually considered history and literature. More specifically, it focuses on Chang Ai-ling's *lao tai-tai* 老太太 characters, who appear mainly in her early writings.① Her female characters generally span a range of historically important times and events from the last decade of the Nineteenth century to the first years of the Communist regime in the early 1950s. As a result, their lives reveal in part Chinese women's reactions to the drastic political, social, and economic changes in the nation. A convenient translation for *lao tai-tai*, literally "Old Mistress," may be "matriarch." Chang Ai-ling uses "Old Mistress" in her own translation of "Chin-suo chi" 金鎖記 ("The Golden Cangue" 530-559). However, both "old" and "mistress" do not have the positive cultural connotation the characters lao (old) and the phrase *tai-tai* (mistress) possess in Chinese. For old age itself is a status symbol, and old people are generally to be venerated. As opposed to a concubine, a *tai-tai* also carries the weight of legality in traditional China: a man could have many concubines but only one wife. Together, the term *lao tai-tai* means that the woman is advanced in generation as well, for at least one of her sons has married and his wife is now the *tai-tai*. Thus, since *lao tai-tai* characters are very much the special product of Chinese patriarchy, I maintain the original term lao *tai-tai* in this paper.

Though they are rarely in the limelight of the stories, *lao tai-tai*

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① This paper deals with five of Chang Ai-ling's works written before 1952, when she left China for Hong Kong. A list of the stories and the *lao tai-tai* characters is included as Figure 1.

characters loom large in the background and often make decisions that directly affect the lives of the main characters. Generally born at the end of imperial China, they witness the disintegration of the very systems–both the dynastic and extended family structures–they were brought up in; thus, they provide a link between the old and the new Chinas. Their life stories, mainly their marriages, then turn into incessant struggles to defend the crumbling systems. This paper 1) looks into the Chinese familial structure that begets the *lao tai-tai* characters Chang Ai-ling depicts, 2) analyzes five *lao tai-tai* characters from five of her stories, and 3) reassesses these characters in the context of history.

A Family Within the Family–the "Uterine Family"

To understand how *lao tai-tai* come to possess controlling power over the family affair, we should first examine the social milieu which brought them into existence. Whether or not she comes from an extended family, every *lao tai-tai* ends up in one, which, to use Judith Stacey's definition, was a "joint household, in which all married sons, their wives, and their progeny lived with the unmarried siblings" (31). Such a household, based on Confucian "protocol for proper family life," reflects at once

> a patriarchal, patrilineal, and patrilocal family system. Sex, age, and generation were the coordinates that defined an individual's status, role, privileges, duties, and liabilities within the family order. Men officially dominated women; the old dominated the young. (31)

From a woman's point of view, the structure is not very attractive. Yet, though extremely patriarchal, this system is more complicated than a strictly sex- and gender-based system. For a person's age and generation interact with sex and gender in determining status. Thus, within the Chinese patriarchal system, owing to her advanced generational status and

often advanced age as well, it becomes possible for a *lao tai-tai* to head an extended household, in which her supreme power is acknowledged by all family members. In short, she assumes the role of a patriarch.

But this authoritative *lao tai-tai* position is practically the investment of more than half of a woman's life. Kay Ann Johnson has argued that the Chinese patrilineal and patrilocal marriage system strips a woman not only of her natal family, but also of the social relationships she has established all her life (8-13). Various symbolic and social conventions also help to enforce the outsider's status of women. For example, the village exogamy and same-surname exogamy practice practically severe the support groups a woman has established since birth. The symbolic gesture of spilling a basin of water when the daughter goes to her husband's house on the wedding day indicates that once a woman is married, she ceases to exist in her parents' house just as spilled water can never be retrieved. In her husband's house, she remains an outsider until the births of her children, which give her an opportunity to develop ties of affection and loyalty and to form a mother-centered "uterine family."② For widowed *lao tai-tai*, as with most of Chang Ai-ling's *lao tai-tai* characters, the extended family and the uterine family are nearly identical (Wolf 11).

To secure her authority in the uterine family, a mother inevitably adapts and manipulates patriarchal norms, both because patriarchy is the only system she knows and because these norms are sanctioned by society at large. Since *Li chi* 禮記 (The Record of Rites), one of the most important Confucian classics, has established the men-outside and women-inside dichotomy, women's power is recognized through household management. In a society that emphasizes great family values, the person

② The term "uterine family" is coined by Margery Wolf to indicate the small circle formed among a mother and her children within a traditional family structure. See Margery Wolf 9.

who holds the key to the family economy also wields controlling power over other family members. In a traditional Chinese extended family, there is a very realistic ring to the term key-holder. The various storage rooms and trunks that hoard the family's title deeds, heirlooms, and trousseaux from generations of women are a good indication and reflection of the family's economic and social status. And the keys to these rooms and trunks are traditionally in the possession of the woman who manages the household, namely the legal wife of the oldest generation. Thus, for a woman in an extended family, the real symbol of power is to hold the keys of the family, not just to manage everyday routines. *Li chi* discusses the tradition of familial administration power in very concrete terms. However, what is prescribed as normal transition of administration power between generations in *Li chi* is generally practiced quite differently in reality: "When the father-in-law dies, the mother-in-law passes the responsibility [in household management] to the eldest daughter-in-law" (Wang 453). Not all mothers-in-law abide by this instruction, and those who do usually delegate only daily routines to the daughters-in-law. The keys are often kept by the mothers-in-law (Liu 452), and it is not uncommon for a mother-in-law to hold on to them until her death.

The common saying "enduring being a daughter-in-law for ten years turns one into a mother-in-law" 十年媳婦熬成婆[shih-nien hsi-fu ao-ch'eng p'o] summarizes well the intricate relationship of power suppression and the oppressor-oppressed complex between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law. To a woman, being a mother-in-law is the beginning of a new era. She now holds the greatest economic power that she is entitled to, and she is in the position of assuming the role of an oppressor, should she choose. Finally, her advanced age, her status as a member of an older generation, and the resulting high rank let the *lao tai-tai* transcend her traditional role as a woman in the sex/gender system. Ironically, or rather

naturally, the price they pay to be above the sex/gender system is their gender. Without husbands and at an advanced age, they are in effect neuter. And it is in this de-sexed status that they are able to command control of the household with social sanction.

Their Stories

Of Chang Ai-ling's early works, five contain such *lao tai-tai* characters. Figure 1 is a list of the five stories and the *lao tai-tai* characters in them.

TITLE	CHARACTER
"The Golden Cangue" "金鎖記" (1943)	Chiang *lao tai-tai* 姜老太太
"*Ch'ing-ch'eng chih lien*" "傾城之戀" "Love That Topples Cities" (1943)	Pai *lao tai-tai* 白老太太
"*Ch'uang-shih chi*" "創世紀" "The Creation" (1944)	Tzu-wei 紫微
"*Liu-ch'ing*" "留情" "Lingering Love" (1945)	Yang *lao tai-tai* 楊老太太
"*Hsiao Ai*" "小艾" "Little Ai" (1950s)	Hsi *lao tai-tai* 席老太太

Figure 1

Without exception, all five *lao tai-tai* characters are from extended families of the upper class. As daughters of upper-class families, they have brought along with them to their marriages both a considerable trousseau and their patriarchal heritage–their upbringing as well as the high social status of their parental family. Together, the trousseaux and their family background have provided them a highly promising position in the new household: they are the legal wives who are expected to manage the household economy and dictate its personnel one day. As generations of *lao tai-tai* had been

before them, they would probably be happy to be the traditional mothers-in-law, sometimes benevolent and sometimes stern. But the social and political changes, especially the revolutions which changed China from an imperial regime to a republic, have cut off the life support of the extended families. The end of the Civil Service Examination, through which scholars achieved officialdom for over a thousand years, terminated one major way of life for the sons of the established families. The frequent wars during this period–the Ch'ing dynasty vs. foreign countries, the Ch'ing dynasty vs. the revolutionaries, infighting among the warlords, and later the Sino-Japanese War–cut the extended families off from other traditional means of income: land tenure in the country. For wars often cut off transportation between cities and countryside, draw manpower from the farmland, and devastate the crops. Not only can the extended families not depend on the harvest of the land tenants, but also the land itself is devalued drastically or even lost due to war. For the *lao tai-tai* characters, this means the unchallenged authority that came with their elder status in the family is no longer backed up with substance. The family income dwindles, while the family size keeps growing. Their authority is thus vexed with worries about survival. To support their three-generation families, they first sell the land that is still available in the countryside. When even the land is gone, they are reduced to first using their own money and then to selling and pawning items from their trousseaux and family antiques. In all five cases, almost all male characters are effeminate, inadequate, absent, or dead. Four of the five *lao tai-tai* are widows. The only husband who appears in person lives off his wife without qualm. Few of the male offspring are able to survive on their own, and all are pampered by their mothers.

T'ang Wen-piao summarizes the common characteristics of Chang Ai-ling's *lao tai-tai* characters as "obstinate, authoritarian, and indulgent"

(24). While the first two traits often exist in patriarchal reigns *per se*, the last one is more specific to the reign of women. However, the indulgence extends mainly to the sons; the daughters and daughters-in-law are often expected to abide minutely by Confucian behavior codes. This partial maternal attention results in the sons' limited ambitions, if any, in life and a tension between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, and sometimes between mothers and daughters as well. Consequently, this indulgence of the sons often weakens the patriarchal tradition, for it undermines the patrilineal strength established through the patriarch's tenacity and authority. While the reigning mother tries to safeguard the continuation of patriarchy by exercising her power, she has in fact fatally weakened it. This is why once she dies usually no one else is strong enough to hold the family together: the daughters-in-law have accrued too much grievance, the daughters marry off to other families and repeat their mothers' examples there, and the sons are so conditioned by their mothers that they are too weak to guard the interest of the family.

Chiang lao tai-tai 姜老太太： The Locksmith and the Key Holder

Chiang *lao tai-tai* in "The Golden Cangue" is a typical example. Since she is either the cause of people's actions or the topic of their conversation, she exists on almost every page of the first half of the story. Although she never appears in person in the story, her authority is revered so much that women of younger generations tend constantly to her will. All women in the house, including the daughter, daughters-in-law, and servant maids, dress themselves and wear make-up according to her liking. Her daughter and daughters-in-law pay their respects to her religiously each morning. Once she expresses a yearning for candied walnuts, the next morning all three daughters-in-law and the daughter peel walnuts for her snack while waiting to pay morning greetings to her in an adjacent quarter to her bedroom. When they hear that she is up, "They all [

straighten] their blouses hastily, [smooth] the hair in front of their ears, [lift] the curtain to go into the next room, [curtsy], and [wait] on Old Mistress at breakfast" (534). The mere mention that she is awake in the next room alerts all who are present to tidy themselves up before being seen by her.

Yet she is very soft on her sons. She indulges her second son, the invalid, in smoking opium. The third and the youngest son has been a squandering playboy, apparently with her silent consent. He overdraws the family funds and spends them in various entertainment quarters both before and after his marriage. Yet he is the only character in the story who appears unsubdued before Chiang *lao tai-tai.* She lets the third son lean against her window sightseeing during her daily sutra-chanting. Although she is very particular with every detail of the appearance and behavior of the women in the household, the third son does not have to observe any formality even in a moment of worship. In the end, Chiang *lao tai-tai's* death heralds the dissolution of the Chiang clan. The second son dies before she does, and Ch'i-ch'iao, the second daughter-in-law and the protagonist of the story, following her example, rules her household with two sets of rules–a picky iron fist for her daughter and daughter-in-law, and a soft, enticing hand for her only son. Not much is told about what happens to the third son after the division of the family assets among the three brothers. The last time we see him in the story, he is trying to swindle the widowed Ch'i-ch'iao in order to solve his financial problems.

Above all, what ignites the whole story is Chiang *lao tai-tai's* decision to marry Ch'i-ch'iao, the sister of a sesame-oil shopowner, to her invalid son as a wife, rather than a concubine. Hsün Yü, one of the first Chang Ai-ling critics of the 1940s, notices the pivotal role that Chiang *lao tai-tai* plays in Ch'i-ch'iao's life:

A character who was eligible only as the concubine of an invalid

> young master has been raised high and becomes the wife instead, all because of the Old Mistress's one good thought (or was it one miscalculation) ……In an environment like the Chiangs', even as a concubine one may not have a good ending, but at least her "desire for gold" would not be pushed so high. Consequently, her desire for love would not be repressed so much. (117)

It is indeed Chiang *lao tai-tai* who uses the position of a daughter-in-law of a rich mandarin family as a golden cangue to lock Ch'i-ch'iao in. All this is to ensure that the second branch will have a "proper mistress." And since the elevated position of a legal wife in a mandarin family is beyond Ch'i-ch'iao's expectation, "she would look after Second Master faithfully" (531). From the point of view of the Chiang clan, Chiang *lao tai-tai* has done the exact right thing: serving the best interest of the family. That Ch'i-ch'iao's life becomes a casualty in sustaining the Chiangs is an unfortunate necessity that is often dismissed by patriarchy as inevitable mistake. Though not a Chiang woman by birth, Chiang *lao tai-tai* aligns herself with the patriarchal line of the Chiang family; her actions all bear the single-minded purpose of safeguarding the continuation of the Chiang household. We should note, moreover, that this single-mindedness sharpens as a woman's position in the patriarchy reaches a zenith.

Hsi lao tai-tai 席老太太： The Next Generation

The Chiang family is divided among the three sons immediately after Chiang *lao tai-tai's* death; the Pai ("*Ch'ing-ch'eng chih lien*") and Hsi ("*Hsiao Ai*") families reveal what happens to the extended families if they stay undivided. In terms of time, both Pai *lao tai-tai* in "*Ch'ing-ch'eng chih lien*" and Hsi *lao tai-tai* in "Hsiao Ai" are the generation of Chiang *lao tai-tai's* daughters. The main difference between the two is that Hsi *lao tai-tai* dies before the Sino-Japanese War and thus avoids witnessing the disconcerting last days of the extended families. Thus, in essence

Hsi *lao tai-tai* shares the same fate as Chiang *lao tai-tai.* As far as *lao tai-tai* characters are concerned, Hsi *lao tai-tai* reinforces the traditional *lao tai-tai* role we have learned from Chiang *lao tai-tai.*

Through the story of its title character and a maid, "Hsiao Ai" reveals what the tail end of the extended family tradition is like–the awkward transition between abundantly complacent family life and the pre-war small households of embarrassingly calculating economy. The Hsi family, where Hsiao Ai makes her debut at the age of nine, provides us with a closeup of how the extended family tries to cope with the changing times. Much like Chiang *lao tai-tai,* Hsi *lao tai-tai* treats her sons and younger women of the family very differently. She goes to bed late but gets up early, so all the daughters-in-law have to follow suit in order to pay their morning greetings to her. However, she takes afternoon naps, and they are not allowed to. When she wants to scold them, she doubles the insult by either doing it in a neighboring room (so the whole household can hear her) or sending a maid to pass the message. Yet she is always very considerate towards her sons, especially to Ching-fen, the fifth one, who has been the mandarin officer of both the Ch'ing dynasty and the Republican government:

> because Ching-fen does not always live at home, only comes back every few days from his "small residence," to chitchat with *lao tai-tai,* her whole face smiles the moment she sees him and she indulges him very much. Seeing him already wearing summer clothes, she says smilingly, "You have changed season already? Not cold? The mornings and evenings of the last couple of days are still quite chilly." She then turns her head and tells the maid servant, "There is still half bottle of milk left. Warm it up and bring it in for the Fifth Master. Don't put too much ginger root juice. It was way too spicy for me earlier." (127)

It is as if the tender side of motherhood is reserved for the male descendents only. Little wonder this fifth son, whom Hsi *lao tai-tai* indulges most, also squanders a good portion of the family assets. Dead before the Sino-Japanese War starts, Hsi *lao tai-tai* lived the last self-sufficient days of the extended families: there are still lands in the country to support the family with crops and rent.

Nevertheless, she is among the last who can still put on the facade of a dignified *lao tai-tai* appearance in the dying tradition of extended families. Turbulent changes from both inside and outside the family are forming undercurrents to overthrow the traditional family structure. But Hsi *lao tai-tai* is spared of all these. She dies in the early 1930s, before the whole country is plunged into a battlefield and before the Hsi family cannot but divide among all the branches.

Pai lao tai-tai 白老太太： The Changing Morality

"Ch'ing-ch'eng chih lien" is about how a love affair of Pai Liu-su, a divorced woman of an extended family, results in marriage. We see Liu-su's mother, Pai *lao tai-tai* head the family in the war time Shanghai. To support the three generations of over ten people under the same roof, she has apparently been selling family assets in the countryside. But that means is coming to an end, and she is sadly aware of it: "A couple of years ago, each time to make the ends meet, I sold a piece of land and could get enough to live for quite a while. Not any more now" (207). The inflation caused largely by the war has made even the price of rice a great burden to common people. Under all these circumstances, the Pai household is much like a termite-infested house which no longer has the strength to sustain any outside pressure. Further, this financial deterioration is coupled with the moral degeneration of the family members, and Pai *lao tai-tai* is forced to deal with both. What used to be a tacit understanding of the *lao tai-tai*, namely their sons' debaucherous life style, becomes a

matter too close on hand to ignore: "Not only did he [her fourth son] incur all kinds of sicknesses through visiting prostitutes and gambling quarters, but also he embezzled the family funds" (206-207).

The wars and the sons' squandering have drained up almost all the family resources, leaving Pai *lao tai-tai* a tremendous sense of impotence. As a result, Pai *lao tai-tai* is more lenient than Chiang *lao tai-tai*, especially with regards to moral standards for daughters and daughters-in-law. There is no more pretense of decorum between Pai *lao tai-tai* and her daughters and daughters-in-law; moreover, she is constantly dragged into their bickering. When Liu-su is picked on by her brothers and sisters-in-law, she goes to Pai *lao tai-tai*, who has overheard the whole fight outside. What she has to offer to Liu-su, her own daughter, is practically nothing.

> "Such a chatterbox is your fourth sister-in-law! ... You know, everyone has her own grievance. Your fourth sister-in-law is a strong character. She had been managing the household. Yet your fourth brother let her down. ……He made your fourth sister-in-law lose face, and she had to give up managing the household. She can't take such grief and has never felt gratified since. Your third sister-in-law is not as sharp, so for her to manage the household is not an easy matter. Because of all these things, you have to be considerate to them. ……I'm old, I'll be gone any time soon, and I can no longer take care of you all. No feast lasts forever. It can't be a long-term plan for you just to be with me." (206-207)

No longer is *lao tai-tai* a venerated figure above mundane details. In fact, Pai *lao tai-tai's* life consists of nothing except trivial family quibbles, of which she is to be the umpire whose rules affect nothing outside the household. The Pai's are left behind by the age, just as their family clock which is always an hour late (203).

No one understands this situation better than Pai *lao tai-tai*, for she

has seen the Pai's degeneration step by step. Her husband, "a famous gambler, who dissipated family assets through gambling, was the first one who led the family to a road of bankruptcy" (219). Now her sons are doing away with the little that is left of the family assets. She knows well that she can do nothing to help change her sons' lives; what she does not yet know is that her ability to find her daughters good husbands has also been curtailed by the changing times. She actively participates in the matchmaking for Pao-lo, a daughter born of a concubine of her husband, adorning her with the best jewelry and attires she can muster. The result is beyond everyone's imagination. During the matchmaking party, Fan Liu-yüan, the rich businessman who is supposed to like Pao-lo, sets his eyes on Liu-su instead. When even this familiar ritual escapes Pai *lao tai-tai's* calculation, there is little doubt that the age of *lao tai-tai* has indeed gone. In the end, she lets Liu-su answer the call of Liu-yüan to go to Hong Kong to live with him, knowing well that he did not promise to marry her. No more is there any sign of the social status of a clan family. Pai *lao tai-tai's* consent to Liu-su's departure underlines not so much the moral bankruptcy of the extended family as Pai *lao tai-tai's* acknowledgement of her inability to deal with reality any other way. Indeed the *lao tai-tai* of the 1940s are so conditioned by social circumstances that very few decisions they make still matter.

Yang lao tai-tai 楊老太太： Where Does Love Linger?

In Yang *lao tai-tai* of the "Liu-ch'ing," Chang Ai-ling reveals a different side of the *lao tai-tai* characters. In the absence of their husbands, *lao tai-tai* characters represent their families in socializing with other people for various reasons. On such occasions, *lao tai-tai* characters become individuals with feelings, not just figureheads. Besides their seasoned diplomacy, we also often catch glimpses of their own emotions. Yang *lao tai-tai* is such a case. The main part of the story happens in her room,

during a visit paid to her by her niece Tun-feng and Tun-feng's second husband, Mr. Mi. Though the story seems to focus on the relationship between Mr. Mi and Tun-feng, what lingers after the story is over is rather an image of the amiable aunt who is also an understanding woman and a sharp mother-in-law. In fact, Tun-feng owes her marriage to Yang *lao tai-tai.* Before Tun-feng marries Mr. Mi, one of her brothers-in-law threatened to tell Mr. Mi that her first husband died of syphilis, and the blackmail is eventually settled by Yang *lao tai-tai.*

As the story unfolds, Yang *lao tai-tai* emerges all at once as a congenial hostess, a shrewd housekeeper, a commanding mother-in-law, and a considerate woman. During their visit, when Tun-feng is carried away in her chatting about her first husband, making the situation awkward for Mr. Mi, Yang *lao tai-tai* skillfully diverts the conversation. When an old laborer brings in Yang *lao tai-tai's* bath water, she tips him ten yüan for drinks with appreciation: "At the present time, who would say 'thank you' for ten-yüan's tips! This man is indeed advanced both in year and in virtue" (31). This consideration of people from outside, however, is undercut by her strict attitude toward her servant and family members. She scolds the servant for ironing clothes, worrying that excessive use of electricity may result in its being cut off. when her daughter-in-law offers to get some snacks for the guests, Yang *lao tai-tai* follows her outside the room to send for some baked yams, a cheap and seasonal snack food. Yet all these calculations are necessary, since Yang *lao tai-tai* is supporting the family by selling family antiques.

After Mr. Mi appraises the antiques for her, Yang *lao tai-tai* turns to appraise Mr. Mi and Tun-feng.

> A person with such a [high] position in the stock company, so well learned, so capable with things both new and old, yet so polite and considerate–Tun-feng indeed has married the right man! Yet

> this Tun-feng, though no longer young, is without any sensibility, hurting his feelings all the time with her words. Enough indeed for him to take all this! The time is really different now–men buy this! Were it in the past, how could this be? But this Tun-feng–it is not as if she had not been mistreated by men–still she doesn't cherish her bliss! (26)

As an outsider, her analysis of the relationship between Mr. Mi and Tun-feng is crystal clear. And for her generation, Yang *lao tai-tai* is truly exceptional. She possesses the forte of all the other three women in the story. Her daughter-in-law maintains a salon atmosphere in their living-room, entertaining guests all the time. But as the family situation worsens, her guests change from older and higher-class people to those from a younger and more obscure lot. It is Yang *lao tai-tai* who continues receiving family guests with propriety and dignity. We also learn that Mr. Mi's first wife is terminally sick in bed. The two met and got married when they were both students in England, but their years of marriage is marked by incessant fights. Yang *lao tai-tai's* taste in foreign products and her appetite for knowledge aligns her squarely with Mr. Mi's first wife, one from China's first generation of female students to go abroad. When we first see Yang *lao tai-tai*, she is reading a newspaper. And her room denotes a curious mixture of the old and the new, regression and progress, much like her time: a grayish green metal desk, round metal chairs, a tall metal file cabinet, a refrigerator, and a telephone, as well as an opium bed, although she has quit smoking opium. Moreover, her consideration and appreciation of Mr. Mi dwarfs that of Tun-feng, which is often self-centered. When Mr. Mi and Yang *lao tai-tai* are chatting about foreign travel, Tun-feng "is staring at him coldly, hating him, for he has been worrying about his [first] wife wholeheartedly and for he is not handsome enough to ride in the same rickshaw with her" (28). Tun-feng's

caring for Mr. Mi often stems from her concern for herself, while Yang *lao tai-tai's* thoughts of others often lead back to reflections of her own plight.

> Mr. Mi should be sixty now? The same age as me. Yet how excruciating it has been for me, dragged by such a big family. The daughter-in-law doesn't act in accord with womanly virtues, antagonizing the son into not coming home often and making everything land upon me. How nice it would be to live peacefully in a small house just with one's spouse, as Tun-feng does! Old as I am now, what else could I long for, except to enjoy a free and easy life. (26)

This self commiseration brings out the poignancy of the *lao tai-tai* position during war time. Gone is the dignified and abundant lifestyle of the *lao tai-tai.* Love and life have transformed into matters of the most imminent kinds–the responsibility of supporting a family that is growing in size but gradually leaving behind its culture and time. For Yang *lao tai-tai,* love lingers only where the cruel reality can not reach–in her thoughts.

Tzu-wei 紫微： The Beginning of the End

Tzu-wei in "*Ch'uang-shih chi*" is the only *lao tai-tai* who is in the limelight, sharing the stage with one of her granddaughters. She is the combination of all other four *lao tai-tai,* and she lives through all the historical periods the other four have experienced. Much like Chiang *lao tai-tai* and Pai *lao tai-tai,* she grudges her daughter and daughter-in-law and indulges her son, who stays home without seeking employment. She is also the only *lao tai-tai* who is not widowed. Her husband, however, has been her archrival since they got married decades ago. Basically, he has been a parasite all his life. When he was young, Tzu-wei found him a mandarin official position in Peking through her parental relatives. After repeatedly paying the debts he incurred in the name of socialization, she

forced him to resign the post and moved the household to Shanghai. He has remained home since then, while Tzu-wei takes care of the whole family. Thus, though not widowed, Tzu-wei has been the *de facto* head of the K'uang family.

Born in the family of a prime minister of the Ch'ing court, Tzu-wei embodies the "grand" tradition that produced *lao tai-tai.* What is acquired knowledge to other *lao tai-tai* is life experience to her. At one point in *"Ch'uang-shih chi,"* Tzu-wei remembers one incident when she was only sixteen. She was put under the charge of an old concubine of her father during a flight to the South to avoid the "Joint Expedition of the Eight Powers." She learned afterwards from the concubine that her father had ordered that, in the event of their falling into the hands of bandit soldiers, the concubine was to commit suicide after first throwing Tzu-wei into water ("there must be a river or a well nearby"), for he "could not let her alive to shame [him]" (144). Tzu-wei is indignant–not about the arrangement, but about her father's not trusting her to die voluntarily when such occasion calls. For her, this is what is expected of a woman in her position, and she will do no less.

Tzu-wei has lived an eventful life:

> The rebellion of the Boxer bandits, the prosperity of the prime minister residence, the extinction of the Ch'ing dynasty, the rise and fall of the warlords–until now, when money is worth nothing, and every household has a hard time even with day-to-day life. An unprecedented disaster. (144)

To support her ever-growing family, she sold land and houses and dealt with bonds and currency exchanges. Now, after she has spent most of her trousseau raising the family, she resorts to selling her fur coats to sustain the three-generation family. Summarizing the lives of all the other *lao tai-tai*, Tzu-wei's role is none but the medium of patriarchal continuation.

Indeed Tzu-wei lives to serve the men in her life. As an extremely beautiful daughter, she was a great consolation to her magisterial father in his old age. Later she was a virtuous daughter-in-law to her father-in-law, a capable wife to her squandering husband, and a resourceful mother to her ten children. But "what exactly she likes, she cannot say" (144). There has never been a Tzu-wei, in spite of her beauty, talent, and capability.

Without exception, all these *lao tai-tai* characters fall into what Gayle Rubin describes as the medium of male power (192). Both their complacent submission to patriarchal norms and their adaptation and manipulation of those norms, however twisted to meet their own purposes, are forms of support for the broader patriarchal system. Not only do none of the *lao tai-tai* deviated from the order of patriarchy, but also, in their own ways, they perpetuate the patriarchal system by collaborating with it vigorously to continue the patriarchal family lines. In fact, the very system of Chinese marriage footnotes the validity of Rubin's explication of Lévi-Strauss's theory on the "exchange of women," in which the institution of marriage is seen as a ritual derived from the exchange of gifts between tribes (Lévi-Strauss 52-68). In the oldest Chinese dictionary *Er ya* 《爾雅》, the Chinese term for marriage, *hun-yin*婚姻, is explained as such: "The son-in-law's father is *yin*, and the married woman's father is *hun* 婿之父爲姻　婦之父爲婚" (3.18a). Thus, the original concept of Chinese marriage is not exactly an exchange of women, but an exchange of children between two men. For, just like a woman, a man has little to say about his own marriage, since it is a matter between two fathers. Hence, what is underlined in the Chinese marriage arrangement is foremost the importance of generation. Nevertheless, the exchange is between men and for men, and the objective is unequivocally the continuation of the patriarchal line.

A greater focus on generation rather than on gender in part results

in the uterine family discussed earlier. The time-honored convention of having a mother-centered inner circle within the patriarchal family structure makes Chinese patriarchy a complicated power structure. Looking back over Chinese history, we see that Chang Ai-ling's creations only mimic what was often repeated in imperial lines, as her culture and her own life let her see and experience. Historically, the entire Former Han dynasty (206 B.C. - A.D. 25) was plagued by revolts of in-laws advanced or protected by the empresses and empress dowagers. The dynasty was eventually replaced by Wang Mang, himself an imperial in-law. Many emperors of the Latter Han dynasty (25-220) ascended the throne in childhood. As a result, it became a common event for the Empress Dowagers to reign behind the curtain. The Chin dynasty (265-317) had similar problems and was weakened so much that it was eventually annihilated by the nomadic tribes invading from outside its territory. Yet all these empress dowagers only anticipated Wu Chao (624-705), or Emperor Tse-t'ien, of the T'ang dynasty, the first and only female emperor in the history of China. After she enthroned and deposed two of her sons, she finally took the throne herself and changed the T'ang dynasty to the Chou dynasty. During the 11th Century, Empress Dowager Kao and Empress Dowager Hsiang of the Sung dynasty (960-1127) both participated in court hearings and formed cliques among court officials. The last but not least Empress Dowager Tz'u-hsi 慈禧太后 became a paradigm of female despotism. She controlled China's last dynasty for nearly half a century from the death of her husband in 1860 to her own death in 1908. Two emperors reigned during this period, but both were enthroned by her and were under her control. The Ch'ing dynasty weakened significantly and was eventually overthrown in 1911, three years after her death.

Much of the causal relationship between the women despots and the fates of dynasties may be exaggerated by patriarchal interpretations,

which often lay the blame on women. Yet it is worth noting that all these imperial women were striving to pass the power on to male relatives, whether from natal or marital families. Thus, on the ruling level as well as the social level, "the traffic in women," as Rubin points out, not only establishes the kinship system in allying economic and political powers, but positions women as the medium for male power transmission (169-177). Both the *lao tai-tai* characters in Chang Ai-ling's works and the empress dowagers in Chinese history explicate the Confucian emphasis of social hierarchy, especially in terms of familial human relationships. Their coming to power, whether delegated or usurped from the patriarchal line, is in great part a result of the Confucian tradition's privileging seniority both in age and in generation. For the common people, the extended family structure provided a necessary incubator for *lao tai-tai* patriarchs. With the disappearance of extended families, the term *lao tai-tai* loses its patriarchal connotation. While they might still be respected for their seniority, they lose the stage where their power could be in play.

Conclusion

Chang Ai-ling's works are a fine demonstration of what Fredric Jameson calls "national allegories" (69): the conflation of "fiction" and "reality" in her writing makes her works a testimony of a historical time. In a sense, each extended family is a small-scale Ch'ing dynasty under the reign of its own empress dowager, the *lao tai-tai.* The stories of these *lao tai-tai* record clearly how women have coped with the drastic social changes that affected traditional Chinese family structure since the late Ch'ing period. They stand stalwartly in front of their families against changing political and economic conditions, trying to maintain the families' past glory. It is indeed in this obstinately conservative posture that

these *lao tai-tai* resemble Empress Dowager Tz'u-hsi the most. Tzu-wei's temporary flight to the South during the "Joint Expedition of the Eight Powers" reminds one of the same occasion when Tz'u-hsi had to flee from Peking to Hsi-an (*"Ch'uang-shih chi"* 144). Chiang *lao tai-tai* moved the entire family from the north to Shanghai to avoid wars caused by "the changing of dynasties" ("The Golden Cangue" 530). The other three *lao tai-tai* sell pieces first from family property and eventually from their own trousseaux to support the whole family. All this was done in the same spirit as Empress Dowager Tz'u-hsi's trying vainly to salvage the Ch'ing dynasty. To sustain the declining empire, many unequal treaties were signed with foreign countries, in which many cities, including Shanghai, became foreign concessions. Many pieces of land, such as Hong Kong and Taiwan, were let or ceded to the foreigners. Sometimes, even the plots mimic historic events. The following description in "The Golden Cangue" reminds the reader of what had just become history–the deaths of Emperor Kuang-hsü and Empress Dowager Tz'u-hsi: "Last year she [Ch'i-ch'iao, Chiang *lao tai-tai's* daughter-in-law] wore mourning for her husband and this year her mother-in-law had passed away" (540). The dying out of these *lao tai-tai* inevitably heralds the beginning of the end of the extended family tradition. After the deaths of the *lao tai-tai*, their sons have neither the moral strength nor the material means to stay together; the extended family finds itself forced to be replaced by nuclear families.

In conclusion, Chang Ai-ling's *lao tai-tai* characters reflect two cultural symptoms. First, whenever there was a danger for the male power transition, women were placed as medium of male power transmission. Second, the generation of Chang Ai-ling's *lao tai-tai* in part reflects how traditional China initially reacted to the Western modern world. While there was a keen awareness of the inevitability of new social structures that impede every way of the old life, there was an even keener

sense of inability to cope with the changes. Coming from a declining extended family, Chang Ai-ling both witnessed and gone through many such excruciating experiences. The stories of these *lao tai-tai* are "sensuous, trivial, and superfluous textual presences" (Chow 85) that Chang Ai-ling uses to capture the essence of female existence in an important age of Chinese history. The surviving experiences of her *lao tai-tai* are thus what Rey Chow called "the fragmented symptoms of historically produced but epistemologically unrecognized conflicts" (120). Both Western and Chinese scholars, particularly those who study Chinese history and literature (both categories overwhelmingly male), are still trying to unravel the riddle that is modern China. Maybe in addition to reinterpreting the obvious political and social events, as generations of scholars have been doing, it is time also to examine certain long overlooked "details": the effects and counter-effects these events had on people other than traditional male-oriented intellectuals. Among such details are the feminine details that Chang Ai-ling, as well as writers like her, provides with both her own life and the lives of the characters she has created.

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