



# Analysing the Historical Changes of The Song of Long Hatred from the Perspective of the Lane

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**Abstract.** As the typical architecture of the city of Shanghai and the living space of Shanghai citizens, the lane is naturally the background of the narrative of *The Song of Eternal Hatred*. Wang Anyi describes Shanghai's alleys with delicate strokes in *The Song of Eternal Hatred*, and in her writing, the alleys are very vital, as if warm to the touch. From the perspective of time, this paper divides the text into three stages: before the liberation of Shanghai, after the founding of the People's Republic of China, and after the reform and opening up of the country. Focusing on Wang Qiyao, this paper explores, through the people she comes into contact with, the things she experiences, and her attitude towards life, the alley dwellers' attitudes towards the times and their lives as they have changed in the course of the past forty years.

**Keywords:** The Song of Eternal Hatred, The Lane, Period Narrative

## 1 Introduction

In *The Song of Everlasting Hatred*, Wang Anyi does not highlight the changes of the times and the change of regime, but reflects the changes of the times through a series of trivialities in the lives of the residents of the lane. Wang Anyi once mentioned in an interview that "the face of history is not made up of a number of major events, but the evolution of life day by day, bit by bit. For example, the dress of women in the streets of Shanghai has changed from a variety of colours of cheongsams to a Lenin outfit, and this is the kind of history I am concerned about."<sup>[1]</sup> *The Song of Long Hatred* recounts the history of changes in the lives of Shanghai citizens from the 1940s to the 1980s in a trivial lane life.

## 2 Before the liberation of China

In *The Song of Eternal Hatred*, Wang Anyi does not give a complete account of Shanghai's pre-liberation history, but rather limits the novel's text to the last three years of the Nationalist government's rule. In presenting this period, Wang does not depict the alleyways in detail, but simply summarises them as "dark" and "quiet", in which "darkness" and "quietness" are mixed with "darkness" and "quietness". The "darkness" and

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"quietness" are mixed with the curiosity of the residents of the lane about common things and the pervasive rumours. On the contrary, Wang Anyi describes in detail the prosperity of Shanghai from different angles, such as the wide variety of fashions in the windows, the colourful neon lights on the roads, the holding of various parties, the election of Miss Shanghai, etc. The "quietness" of the lane and the "dryness" of Shanghai citizens, the "slight" description of the lane and the "detailed" description of prosperous Shanghai. The "quietness" of the alley and the "dryness" of the Shanghai citizens, the "slight" description of the alley and the "detailed" description of the bustling Shanghai form a sharp contrast. "Wang An-Yi's description of the lane in this period implies the corruption and decay behind Shanghai's prosperity and the residents' different attitudes towards politics and fame, showing that such a society is like a bubble that will vanish in the blink of an eye.

In *The Song of Everlasting Hatred*, the story of the forty-year period does not unfold in a grandiose way, but from the small and insignificant entry point of the "film factory", which is more relevant to the actual life of the residents who are far away from the political centre. Most of the people in Shanghai were only aware of the major events that happened in the society, but their consciousness was not high enough to analyse these events from a political perspective, so they could not really participate in the events, but these changes in the society affected the daily life of the people in a subtle way. In 1946, after Japan's surrender, the city of Shanghai was transformed into a city of joy, where bad things could be turned into good things, and the whole city was immersed in an atmosphere of amusement, but the citizens of Shanghai did not see the essence of the decay behind the appearance. After the flooding in Henan, Shanghai even chose to raise money for the victims by means of an extremely ostentatious beauty pageant. Although the intention was to raise money for the refugees, the way it was done was enough to show the rotten nature of Shanghai, which was no longer a colony but had left behind its colonial culture. It can be said that the citizens' reaction to this political change was lagging behind, ignorant of the fact that they had gained personal independence and were no longer oppressed, but their thinking remained unchanged.

"It was the spring of 1948 when Wang Qiyao moved into Alice's flat. It was a particularly tense year, with the civil war raging and the future uncertain. But the world of 'Alice' was always a gentle, rich country with endless situations."<sup>[2]</sup> During the turbulent years of the civil war, Wang Anyi did not play up the tense atmosphere of the war years, but expressed the changes of the social environment through Wang Qiyao's behaviors during this period. Wang Qiyao succeeds in attracting Director Li, an official of the national government, in the Miss Shanghai pageant, and naturally becomes Director Li's mistress. This change of identity does not make Wang Qiyao feel uneasy and ashamed, because such things are commonplace in Shanghai. "It is a world of damask and tassels, and velvet is a kind of material, and even the woodwork flows with the soft, shining light of satin. It's a world where yarns are piled on yarns, where everything trails and covers the sky, where it's extraordinarily soft and shiny and smooth, where there are embroidered foot mat in front of the bath tub, embroidered futons on the sofa, embroidered tents on the bed, and embroidered table surrounds around the table."<sup>[2]</sup> These were things she would never have had in an old-fashioned lane. Like Wang Qiyao, the citizens of Shanghai in the 1940s were full of desire and ambition to pursue

fame and fortune under the temptation of a luxurious life and the culture of capitalism. Not only did men want to gain power, but also women wanted to make a fortune by virtue of their beauty, and Wang Anyi's portrayal of this period fully embodies the intoxication of the Nationalist government in Shanghai.

Wang Qiyao, on the other hand, treated the current situation with indifference, which was mainly reflected in her attitude towards Director Li. After Wang Qiyao came to Alice's flat, waiting became the whole of her life. Director Li always came and went in a hurry, but Wang Qiyao never asked about the changes in the current situation, and she did not understand and was not interested in the political situation and official business. Wang Qiyao's attitude towards Director Li and the current situation also reflects the attitude of most of the alleyway citizens, who are not sensitive to politics and the current situation, and are on the periphery of politics, they only focus on their ordinary lives. Although the change of regime is a turnaround in history, the failure of the national government is only declared in *The Song of Long Hatred* by the incident of Director Li's plane crash. The choice of Director Li, a high-ranking official of the national government, who crashed and died, as the object of description, is the only way to understand the end of the era in a way that shocks the citizens.

### 3 After the establishment of the PRC

When the novel shifts its narrative perspective to Ping'anli, the narrative time comes to the 1950s and 1960s. Wang Anyi does not develop a detailed description of the domestic and international turmoil after the liberation in this part, but rather takes the lives of the residents of Ping'anli as the base to indirectly show the whole society. "The Song of Everlasting Hatred has always centred on the description of many marginal characters, digging out the traces of their lives from the corners of history, and the vivid lives are no longer simplified into events and figures, and every small character is speaking out, and the 'singular capitalised history' has become the 'lower-case pluralised history'".<sup>[3]</sup>

Wang Anyi describes the citizens of Shanghai in her novel as "Shanghai's citizens, all of whom have made their lives small, are on the fringe of politics."<sup>[2]</sup> They keep their hearts in peace and live a life of struggle. Although most of the citizen class were not directly involved in politics, they were all inevitably affected by the times. Luxemburg has said, "A general point of view from which coherent explanations and uniform solutions can be proposed to all the local problems of practical and spiritual life."<sup>[4]</sup> *The Song of Everlasting Hatred* takes Wang Qiyao as a typical figure, expressing the mood of a little girl in a Shanghai lane, and in her encounter with her life, a certain aspect of the small life scene in Shanghai from the 1940s to the 1980s is implied.

In the second part, Wang Anyi takes Wang Qiyao as the centre and shows the various different identities of the people radiated by Wang Qiyao. Wang Qiyao's identity, as she was previously Director Li's concubine and inextricably linked to him, should have been reformed, but after the liberation of Shanghai, there were no clear measures for the reform of those who lived in the Alice Apartments, so it can be said that Wang Qiyao escaped under the uncertainty of the policy at the time. The other woman in

“Night Talks Around the Fireplace” is Yan Shimu, who lives in a single-family house at the bottom of Ping'an Lane, and was originally a capitalist's wife. The Song of Eternal Hatred does not describe in detail the process of public-private partnership, but from Yan Shimu's daily inactivity, we can feel the despondency and helplessness of the capitalists in the new society. Kang Mingxun is a young master of a rich family in the past, but he is out of place in the new society. He has no job and does nothing every day, so he can only become an idle member of the society and live on his family's money. Sa Sha is an international child, his father is a cadre from Yan'an and his mother is from the Soviet Union. His birth reflects our close co-operation with the USSR at the time of the founding of New China, and with the breakdown of the relationship between the two countries, he has become a product of the outcasts, unable to escape the fate of the turbulent drifting. Each person in “Around the Fireplace and Night Talks” has his or her own unique identity, and they represent both independent individuals and a certain type of people in the social environment of the time. The impact of social development on Shanghai citizens is refracted through a look at the daily lives of these four people in Ping An.

According to Ben Haemmerle, "Daily life is that which is commonplace and repeats itself."<sup>[5]</sup> Therefore, in the second part of the book, which spans a period of nearly thirty years, Wang An-Yi seizes two points in time to express the lives of the residents of Ping'anli through the most common changes in their daily lives in terms of food and drink, thus indirectly reflecting the background of the time and the living conditions of the citizens. Wang An-Yi first narrates the fireside world of 1957, "It was the winter of 1957, and big events were happening in the outside world, which had nothing to do with this fireside world. This small world was on the edge of the world, or in the cracks, forgotten by each other, and it was safe."<sup>[2]</sup> This year coincided with the closing year of the first five-year plan, the material life of the people was enriched, and the inhabitants of Ping'anli were still able to lead their own leisurely and refined lives, which we can feel from the food eaten by the four of them during their nightly conversations around the stove, even though there were only four of them, but the food was of a complete variety and refined: dried Korean fish, slices of roasted rice cake, Soviet Bread ..... In contrast, during the three-year famine, although everyone still talked about food, the content was very different, and the public no longer discussed how to eat, but thought about what they could eat. Wang Anyi writes in her article describing Wang Qiyao's diet again that " Mr Cheng's re-encounter with Wang Qiyao was all about food. This eating is not that eating, this eating is satiating, unlike the afternoon tea and evening snacks of the past with Yan Shimu, which was all about killing time."<sup>[2]</sup> In these two time points, Wang Qiyao's life changes, from the previous pursuit of exquisite food to how to fill her stomach. Wang Qiyao, as an ordinary resident of Ping'anli, even had some savings, but she lived in such poverty, so one can imagine how poor the lives of other residents were under the circumstances at that time.

In the second part, despite the long narration time, Wang Anyi always narrates the daily life of the residents of Ping'anli, "but it is precisely this small-scale, tiny changes in the minutiae of the real society, expressed through the shocking sensitivity within the personal world, that makes it more intuitively perceptible to the thick sense of history behind the minutiae."<sup>[6]</sup>

#### 4 After the reform and opening up of China

In its representation of the post-reform and opening-up period, *The Song of Everlasting Hatred* embodies the different tendencies of two groups of people in the process of urban modernisation. Among them, the new generation, represented by Weiwei, pursues new fashions and has no great interest in the culture of old Shanghai in the past, while the other group, led by Lao Kela, seeks for the imprints of the old Shanghai in the city.

In Wang Anyi's eyes, this is a "changed Shanghai". After forty years of changes, Shanghai's romantic mood and modern fashion have been left in Wang Qiyao's time, and very few young people in the generation of Weiwei know the stories of Wang Qiyao's time, and these old objects have been left behind. The old objects have been put behind them, and they focus on the new fashions of the moment. Shanghai's lanes also look old under the youth's vigour, "Shanghai's lanes have become more gloomy, the ground is cracked, the walls are also cracked, the lamps in the lane, called the naughty children smashed, the gutter blocked, the sewage is flowing."<sup>[2]</sup> With the growth of the new generation and the development of the modern city, the vintage lanes have been left behind by the times, leaving only a shabby skin, and the garden houses, which used to be a symbol of trendiness and aristocracy, have fallen off the pedestal, and are no longer exquisite and prosperous houses, but have become a place for the common people to live, which is full of traces of daily life. The world outside has changed drastically, and in the midst of this hustle and bustle, the core of the alley has also slowly changed, and people have begun to pursue a kind of rough fashion, especially among the young boys and girls of the Weiwei generation.

At a time when the pursuit of new fashions is all the rage, there are still some people with a longing for the old Shanghai style, so the lane house and Wang Qiyao have become the object of people's nostalgic feelings. "The inner part of the houses in the lane is still calm, basically the original appearance, but once pushed, but also different. The aisles of every house, the corners of the stairs, are piled with old things."<sup>[2]</sup> The house where Wang Qiyao lives is such a cohesive place with traces of history, and when Xiaolin, Weiwei's boyfriend, came here, he couldn't help but lament that he saw the old days here, and that even though it was only a fraction of a star, it was the real deal. Wang Qiyao, just like this alley, is also covered with traces of old Shanghai from her life. Zhang Yonghong, Weiwei's girlfriend, keenly discovers the elements of old Shanghai in Wang Qiyao by observing her clothes and mannerisms, and praises Wang Qiyao for being really fashionable. Old Clara, who pursues Shanghai's old fashion, also notices the former "Three Misses of Shanghai" and is curious about her, and keeps approaching Wang Qiyao, longing to pin his nostalgia for old Shanghai on Wang Qiyao. "Her elegance, grace, and composure are finally revealed in an atmosphere of nostalgia that is truly magnificent, and the beauty of the glitterati has no weight in the face of such magnificence".<sup>[7]</sup> Wang Qiyao becomes the embodiment of the old Shanghai in this period, and Wang Qiyao's accidental death also signals the fate of the old Shanghai style of life being left behind in the new era.

## 5 Conclusion

In *The Song of Everlasting Hatred*, Wang Anyi takes the Shanghai alley as the background to unfold the whole novel's narrative, "The alley and the citizens living in it are an important presence in the city, providing the scene for numerous poetic depictions,"<sup>[8]</sup> such as the author's opening paragraph which spares no effort in describing the alley, which lays a solid foundation for the unfolding of the whole novel. With the help of the heroine who comes out from the boudoir, Wang An-Yi follows the ups and downs of Wang Qi-Yao's life - from the young lady of the neighbourhood to the famous "Third Miss Shanghai" and finally the ordinary citizen who earns money by injecting herself with her own strength. Based on this, the author depicts the three historical periods of Shanghai before the liberation, after the founding of the PRC, and after the reform and opening up, and inserts old alleyways, flat alleyways, and Ping'anli into the changing times to express the living conditions of the residents of Shanghai's alleyways. In this way, Wang An-Yi cleverly combines personal history with the history of the city, reflecting the life of Shanghai's citizen class and the changes of the city with the help of the life of Wang Qiyao and others.

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