

Jasmine tea, a mirror of ailing's life

[Family](#), [Mother](#)



Jasmine Tea, a mirror of Ailing's life As the late-Qing poet, diplomatist and politician Huang Zunxian first presented the idea that "I write based on my own experiences and feelings" ("我写诗，总是有感而发") in his poet, whether poems dated back to the Tang dynasty like Wang Wei's 'One-hearted' (一心人) or contemporary Chinese film like Chen Kaige's 'Farewell, My Concubine', literary works and films are believed to be the reflection of authors' and screenwriters' real life to some extent. While reading Zhang Ailing's 'Jasmine Tea', the tragedy of Nie Chuanqing, an extremely unconfident and psychologically distorted young man in search of paternity impressed and interested me. Chuanqing's parents' unsuccessful marriage undoubtedly contributed to his disability in love and psychological illness. Although different from Zhang Ailing's other works like 'Love in a fallen city' and 'Eighteen Springs', which are narrated from a feminine perspective, the novel, written from a masculine perspective, has a contradictory feminine title. Also, the male main character Chuanqing is depicted as a skinny young man with 'a feminine kind of beauty' (Zhang, 79). The contradiction in the novel makes me wonder whether 'Jasmine Tea' is actually based on Zhang Ailing's own life experiences. Do Nie Chuanqing's attitudes towards his parents as well as his professor Yan Ziyue represent Zhang Ailing's own attitudes and feelings? How do Zhang Ailing's real life experiences influence her writing in 'Jasmine Tea'? Taking Zhang Ailing's own family background into account, Nie Chuanqing's thirst for paternity and malformed love of Yan Ziyue reflects her own thirst for a warm and sound family as well as love and care from her parents. Zhang's childhood experience contributed to her writing style in many aspects. Firstly, the

setting of the novel partially coincided with Zhang's background indeed. Setting is important here. It intimates the autobiographical narration of the writing itself (Macdonald). The novel starts with the narrator raising readers' attention by implying the title of the story: ' This pot of Jasmine tea I've brewed for you may be somewhat bitter; this Hong Kong tale that I'm about to tell you may be, I'm afraid, just as bitter. Hong Kong is a splendid city, but a sad one too.' (Zhang, 79). Zhang intended to study in the University of London. However, she finally went to the University of Hong Kong instead due to the invasion of Japan. The engaging invitation to the tea implies the war, which coincides with Zhang Ailing's own experience (Macdonald). Also, like Zhang herself, Nie Chuanqing comes from Shanghai and then moves to Hong Kong for university studying because of the war between Japan and China. Nie lives with his father and stepmother, while his mother died when he was four. However, Nie suffers from the physical and verbal abuse from his father and even from his stepmother. Similar with Nie, Zhang Ailing lived with her father and stepmother during her childhood since her mother left her for Europe when she was four (Shui, 200). Obviously, Zhang's miserable childhood and adolescence influenced her creation of the main character Nie Chuanqing in ' Jasmine Tea'. As Ao Xianhong indicates in her analysis of ' Jasmine Tea' that Zhang Ailing actually abreacted her own resentment of her family and implied her thirst for a loving and sound family through this psychologically distorted young man, Nie Chuanqing (Ao, 5). Therefore, Zhang's family background and experience in childhood helped her create a character with similar experience to her. Nie Chuanqing's thirst for family love also reflects Zhang's longing for the love from her biological parents.

Zhang Ailing was born in a wealthy and prestigious family in Shanghai. However, her mother left to study in England when she was only four years old. She then lived with her father and her stepmother who were addicted to opium. Years later, she escaped from his father's house and then lived with her mother. Her lack of family love contributed to her thirst for a warm and sound family. Zhang's troubled childhood is believed to be source for her writing (Macdonalds). Moreover, Nie Chuanqing in 'Jasmine Tea' and Zhang Ailing herself are similar not only in their backgrounds but also in their characteristics. Nie is described as a depressed, sensitive, and psychologically distorted man. The male character was given feminine characteristics. Different from Yan Danzhu, Nie is extremely unconfident and isolated. He hates all the good things. Nie's isolation and sensitivity are reflection of Zhang's own characteristic (Ao, 5). Also, Nie chuanqing is feminized in both his appearance and characteristics. 'Then again, his skinny neck and thin shoulders could have been those of an adolescent... there, in the rosy sateen gleam of the flowers, his oval-shaped Mongolian face, with its faint eyebrows and with the downturned corners of the eyes, had a feminine kind of beauty.' (Zhang, 77). Zhang's novels are usually narrated from a feminine perspective. Though 'Jasmine Tea' is a story of a depressed young man, Zhang feminizes her male character. Meanwhile, Chuanqing's exquisite internal and psychological activities imply his feminism (Ao, 5). The feminized Nie Chuanqing in 'Jasmine Tea' can be interpreted as Zhang Ailing herself. Zhang uses her male character to express her own feelings. However, though Nie Chuanqing and Zhang Ailing herself are similar in some aspects, whether Nie was written according to

Zhang's experience in childhood and adolescence is still controversial and debatable. In Shao Yingjian's analysis about 'Jasmine Tea', Nie Chuanqing is interpreted as a representation of young people living in the period when China suffered from the invasion of Japan, especially those who lived in the colonial cities. The story in 'Jasmine Tea' happened in Hong Kong in the 1940s. People living in those colonial cities or semi-colonial cities like Shanghai and Hong Kong faced their unpredictable future, feeling perplexed and depressed. At the same time, they experienced the transition of life style and culture as the colony usually had a mixed culture of the traditional Chinese culture and the other countries culture. Nie's dilemma represents the difficulties and confusion people struggling with colonialism faced. Thus, Nie's tragedy illustrates that capitalism and colonialism had a great impact on colonial people (Shao, 90). As Nie could not change the fact that he is the son of Nie Jiechen, people under colonialism were not able to change their fate. Nie's story reflects a psychologically distorted colonial society. Also, Nie Chuanqing's attitudes towards his biological father Nie Jiechen and his ideal father Yan Ziyue can be elucidated as the controversy Hong Kong faced during that time (Wang, 88). Nie aspires for his ideal father Yan Ziyue, while he could not escape from his biological father and his fate. China was undoubtedly Hong Kong's biological father, while Britain was the 'ideal' father. Suffering from the invasion of Japan, China for Hong Kong was like Nie's abject father Nie Jiechen. Although Britain was not a typical ideal father, Hong Kong had no other choice. Whether Nie Chuanqing was written based on Zhang Ailing's own life experience may remain controversial, but Zhang Ailing's experience in her childhood and adolescence were sources for

her writing and helped her establish her own writing style. As Macdonald mentions in his analysis of Zhang Ailing that family structure plays an important role in Zhang's fiction. What Zhang experienced in her childhood: a broken family and lack of parents' love and care made who she was and how she wrote. Zhang's unhappy childhood, her parents' failed marriage, and her lack of parenting all contribute to her writing. As Macdonald cited in his analysis, 'Eileen Chang could not have made significant contributions to Chinese literature if she had broken down under the severe trials as a child and adolescent' (Macdonald). Also, Zhang's stories were mostly settled in Shanghai or Hong Kong, where he grew up. Her experience of living in a colonial city facilitated her description of colonialism in her fiction. Like her attention to detail, details of Zhang's biography do hold an important place in her writing, and elements of her biography are only becoming more important as readers and filmmakers delve into the wartime conditions of her work. Meanwhile, most of Zhang Ailing's works end up with a tragedy, which may be related to her miserable childhood and adolescence. In 'Jasmine Tea', although we cannot conclude that Nie Chuanqing was written based on Zhang Ailing's own story, Nie reflects Zhang's thoughts and feeling towards her parents and her longing for a loving family to some extent. Like the idea that "I write based on my own experiences and feelings" firstly pointed out in Huang's poem, poets, writers and screenwriters write according to their own life. 'Jasmine Tea' provides a good example how writers relate their own life experiences to their works. Work cited: Macdonald, Sean. "Tragic Alliance as (Post) Modernist Reading: "Jasmine Tea" by Zhang Ailing", Hecate Press, May 1, 2009

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