

Original Article

Apolitical or Political: Idealistic Love Pursuits Through the Expression of Individualism and Aestheticism in Eileen Chang's *Love in a Fallen City*

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ABSTRACT: In 2020, The University of Hong Kong celebrated the centennial birth of its alumni Eileen Chang with materials from the HKU Archives. In 2022, a new translation of Eileen Chang's story "Xiang Jian Huan" was discovered from the Ailing Zhang papers of USC Libraries's Special Collection. Echoing recent discoveries in the Eileen Chang Studies, this project ponders upon the motif of politics and adventure fiction within the cultural landscape of Hong Kong. Re-assessing the role of war in historicity, this paper hopes to contribute to new understandings in Hong Kong Studies.

KEYWORDS: Cognition, Depiction, Homo sapiens, Pictorialization, Seeing-in, Upper Paleolithic "creative explosion," Eileen Chang, Hong Kong, Comparative literature, Nation.

1. PROLOGUE

Someone has said that "'the three regrets of one's life' is 'the delicious' shad having too many bones,' 'the aronia flower having no fragrance,' and '.....'" I can't recall the third one. Perhaps I subconsciously thought that "the third regret would be that the *Dream of the Red Chamber* [28] is left unfinished."

2. INTRODUCTION

Eileen Chang's apolitical stance and petite bourgeoisie tendency, utterly at odds with patriotism and communism, exile her works from the canonization of modern mainland Chinese literature and shut out the official recognition of her super literary talents throughout her life. Her apolitical label derives from public exclusion of her heterodoxy a value of self-consciousness over national concerns. She does reveal idiosyncratic politics of individualism and aestheticism in *Love in a Fallen City*. Chang's feminine perspective concentrates on private affairs and an inward tangle of sentiments, combing her personal bourgeois fetishism with romantic plots to construct exquisite aesthetic surroundings. Eventually, she attempts to portray an aesthetic state of ideal love free from politics, economics and militarism. The utopian illusion strives for temporary satisfaction but subsequently results in the melancholy of unattainableness, a self-deception that breaks away from reality and pragmatism. Both quality of writing and political leaning matter for a writer especially for the case of Eileen Chang. Her aptitude for writing cannot be neglected by her heterodox political stance and biased public criticism.

Setting individual emotional tangling against descriptions of the capture of Hong Kong at the end of the novel, the dramatic plot puts personal love pursuits ahead of national causes and uses political issues to save a teetering relationship. The ridiculous ending pokes fun at the seriousness of a national war and totally overturns the normally desperate reactions towards war: "Liu-su did not feel that her place in history was anything remarkable. She just stood up smiling, and kicking the pan of mosquito-incense under the table" (Eileen Chang, 92). Instead of highlighting the people's worry and sorrow during wartime, Chang reveals Liu-su's untimely personal sense of smug satisfaction, easing the somberness of a national war. By mentioning trivial details like "the pan of mosquito-incense" (Chang, 92) as opposed to the serious aftermath of the war, Chang relegates real historical events and politics to mere supporting roles that function as narrative tool to propel the development of the plot. She herself in "From the Ashes" claims her indifference in history "I have neither the desire to write history nor the qualifications to comment on the approach historians ought to bring to their work" (Written on Water 39).

What's more, in the following article vis-à-vis feminine melodrama in Eileen Chang's *Love in a Fallen City*, the text compares Chang's old-fashioned gentry female characters with Ding Ling's revolutionary women, then points out the existence of capitalism and commercialization in Chang's characters.

The 1930s and 1940s belong to a historical period during which revolutionist writers such as Ding Ling depicted women's consciousness and agency as enabled only through fundamental social reform, and reproached commodities and romance as

part of the old social order. Chang's writings, however, suggest that women may achieve individual agency without conforming to the heroic ethic of revolution. (Li Guo 16) [37, 11]

Ding Ling ascribes the independence of women to the benefits of involvement in social reform and praises the virtue of simpleness and collectivism. However, disregarding conventional filial piety and female chastity, Eileen Chang endorses material capitals such as marriage, clothes, and recreational activities as a means for women to secure social status. The bourgeois inclination for commodity fetishism and romantic mythology severs women from outside proletarian reforms, sufferings and poverty. The self-isolated women in Eileen Chang's works deviate from the mainstream call of the May Fourth Movement and establishes Eileen Chang's salient apolitical technique of purely doing art for art sake [23, 24, 25, 26, 29] rather than arts for political means. On one hand, Communist writers treat literature as a device for political propaganda, aiming to inform readers about necessary historical and political contexts. However, to further specify the minor narrative role of history and politics in *Love in a Fallen City*, a comparison of the relationship between Bai Liu-su and Fan Liu-yuan before and after the war emphasizes expression of individualism, such as distinctive attitudes toward love.

Eileen Chang also effectively expresses her personal expectation of romance in an atypical use of a wartime setting. The two scenes describing the same grey wall resonate with each other and indicate the impact of the war on the characters. Before the war, there is a calculated gambling between Bai Liu-su and Fan Liu-yuan, where both characters harbor selfish goals without sincere intentions. Bai Liu-su regards the game as a gambling of her future against her family, with marrying Fan Liu-yuan as her final goal; Fan Liu-yuan considers the game as a mere pleasure instead of a way to marriage. Different goals determine different attitudes towards the relationship: Liu-su remains clam and cautious all the time in case of ruining her reputation and becoming Liu-yuan's mistress; Liu-yuan continues his customary flirtations in a half-careless, half-honest manner. Sharp contrasts between initial motive and attitudes lead to following suspicion, jealousy and misunderstanding. Negative reactions reflect the nature of gambling; no one dares to put in all his chips, and even if one does, the other does not dare to believe it. The same principle is applied to the story when Liu-yuan and Liu-su walked to a tall grey wall, there is one ambiguous dialogue:

"The wall makes me think of the old sayings about the end of the world. [3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8] Someday, when human civilization has been completely destroyed, when everything is burnt, utterly collapsed and ruined, maybe this wall will still be here. [22, 32] If, at that time, we can meet at this wall, then maybe, Liu-su, you will honestly care about me, and I will honestly care about you."

"You admit that you like to play games," Liu-su huffed coyly, "but that doesn't mean you can drag me along with you! When have you caught me lying?"

"Fair enough," said Liu-yuan with a snicker, "There's no more open-hearted than you."

"That's enough...stop patronizing me."

Liu-yuan was silent for a long time. The he sighed. (77)

The wall seems to arouse Liu-yuan's temporary, genuine feelings and confessions. Associating the wall with human civilization and the current unstable political situation, Liu-yuan anticipates a bleak ending in which conventional rules, social structures and selfish benefits will all disappear; everything material standard he and Liu-su care about will disappear. Only substantial entities such as the wall and the human physical body can survive.

In contrast to his former shallow flirtations like "your specialty is bowing the head" (73), his comment on future social changes [29, 30, 31, 33, 34, 35, 36] appears more insightful and genuine. He proposes that if under those circumstances, he and Liu-su will simply care about each other sincerely regardless of political and social self-benefits, an idealistic and pure supposition. However, Liu-su's reply appears rather disappointing because she attributes his words again to normal flirtations and attempts to tease him back. The disappointment stems from Liu-su's limited comprehension to read Liu-yuan's mind and from Liu-yuan's violation of the gambling principles. Making bets forbids true love. He reveals his true feeling, a taboo beyond the rule, and longs for others to read his mind, but Liu-su still sticks to the game. The discrepancy gives rise to an anticlimax to both Liu-yuan and readers, and a sense of unsatisfactory melancholy in the silence. Conversant with social tactics, Liu-yuan immediately switches from temporary deviation to the normal flattery Liu-su refers to. However, both of them are trapped by the exterior rule—money and reputation—and unable to free themselves. Therefore, real inside love is always buried under hypocritical appearance and none of them can reach a higher level of interaction.

3. 8th DECEMBER 1941

On 8th December 1941, a "bombing blasted off the ends of an awful lot of stories" (88) and also altered the story of Bai Liu-su and Fan Liu-yuan. Liu-su recalls the same grey wall she and Liu-yuan once leaned against.

She was sure that the grey brick wall near Repulse Bay was still standing straight and tall. ...She seemed to return in a dream, back to the base of that wall, where she met Liu-yuan, finally and truly met him.

In this uncertain world, money, land, and all the things that last forever, all are unreliable. She could rely only on his breath in her body, and this person sleeping next to her. Suddenly she crawled over to him, hugging him through his quilt. He reached out from the bedding and grasped her hand. They looked and saw each other, each other entirely. (90-91)

The outbreak of the war effectuates Liu-yuan's former postulation and brings Liu-su's memory back to that wall, back to their first meeting. This time, she fully trusts Liu-yuan. Under the chaotic circumstance, man-made morality, paper money and social principle crumble to dust. Nothing can be more significant than substantial, tangible entities such as the grey brick wall, priceless human lives and a breathing body. Eileen Chang portrays war as a tool which alters Liu-su's values. She abandons her calculations of financial benefits, a desire of decent social status and a marriage certificate. Stripping away their disguise, Liu-yuan and Liu-su, for the first time, fully trust and rely on each other. No longer living for others' opinions, they have no scruples about revealing their love and genuine care for each other. At this moment, "she had only him, and he had only her" (89). Thanks to the outburst of the war, their pretentious and material values are reduced to the simplest desire for a spiritual caring in the possession of each other, regardless of a marriage certification or dowry.

Further reiterating the significance of war in a romance, in the end of the novel Eileen Chang writes:

Hong Kong's defeat had given her victory. ...Maybe it was in order to vindicate her that an entire city fell. Countless thousands of people dead, countless thousands of people suffering, and what followed was an earth-shaking revolution. ...There are legends everywhere, but they do not necessarily have such a happy ending. (92)

At that moment, their happiness does not rely on their own determination, endeavor or spontaneous affinity, but on an accidental war. It is the war that breaks down those rigid regulations and selfish interests that Bai Liu-su and Fan Liu-yuan always elude. It is the war that throws a complete social structure into chaos, that creates a time when all hypocritical and material appearance can be discarded. It is the war that blocks Fan Liu-yuan from leaving for the United Kingdom and reunites him with Bai Liu-su. The text ridiculously renders an impression that they are the only beneficiaries of the war.

Avoiding improving characters' personalities to develop their perspective, Eileen Chang entirely relies on the war to propel the advancement of the plot and influence the characters indirectly. Behind the salient changes in attitudes, there are no depictions of people's normal reaction to the war such as physical vulnerability, break-ups of families and nervous breakdowns. Rather, the novel portrays inopportune satisfaction and comfort of the two lovers' "happy ending" against an abyss of suffering outside. The easiness and inappropriateness of happiness during a hard time leads to a questioning of whether the ending is truly happy or just Eileen Chang's parodic treatment of an idealistic romance. Eileen Chang responds to this questioning in "Writing of One's Own," by mentioning her writing style of equivocal contrast, a technique employed in shaping the imagery of Fan Liu-yuan.:

In "*Love in a Fallen City*," ...The battle of Hong Kong doesn't affect Fan Liu-yuan in the sense that it steers him toward a more settled existence and finally marriage, but marriage doesn't make him a saint or compel him to abandon completely his old habits and ingrained tendencies. Thus, although Liu-su and Liu-yuan's marriage is healthy in some way, it remains prosaic, earthbound, and, given their situation, it could be nothing more. (Written on Water 3)

Even if the war is favorable, they depart from home, and their mutual love all happens, Liu-su and Liu-yuan do not necessarily have such a seemingly happy ending. The happy ending only stays valid temporarily because absent of the external interference, the real actors Liu-su and Liu-yuan never change. Their selfishness and individualism determine the short-livedness of their happiness, for their innate weakness of old habits and ingrained tendencies never change; merely, the war momentarily dilutes their strong concerns for individual interests. Hence, they might have "one moment of deep understanding, but this moment [is] enough" (90-91) and only enough to "keep them happy together for a decade or so" (91). After a decade, no one knows the continuing plot, but "he [is] just a selfish man, and she [is] just a selfish woman" (91). Maybe Liu-yuan picks up his "daring talks" (92), teases other young women and still "[thanks] women were just the mud under his feet" (67); maybe Liu-su abandons Liu-yuan and boldly pursues a better third-marriage after she makes another "rapid calculation" (71).

What's more, their love is too conditional. Just as the name of the novel *Love in a Fallen City* indicates, it is a love affair that needs the collapse of an entire city in order to be accomplished. Liu-su and Liu-yuan's happiness requires prerequisites such as a timely war and a separation from family. Their simultaneous mutual love appears so fragile, as it relies on the rare occurrence of a war and a departure from home. The ridiculous logic that so many coincidences add up together to reinforce Liu-su's personal victory goes against expected patriotism and revolutionism called for by the government. The absurd perspective does reflect a sense of individualism in another's personal inclination and a female expectation of an unrealistic love, resulting in the character's overemphasis of self-consciousness and self-importance.

Besides the restricted prerequisites of love, another fallacy lies in Chang's definition of an ordinary couple. She writes that: "In this age of chaos and disorder, there is no place for individualists, but there is always room for an ordinary married couple"

(91). However, there are always countless ordinary couples. Real ordinary married couple actually lead a happy life in anytime anywhere. The true ordinary love goes beyond the prerequisites of time, location and social opinions. Bai Liu-su and Fan Liu-yuan are by no means an ordinary couple. They can only be ordinary in particular time and particular location. Since they always harbor selfish and dissatisfied motives, they are destined to complicated and sophisticated always the opposite of ordinary.

Although Chang's controversial depictions possibly result from an attempt for exaggerated performative effects through a stylish writing mode, it also leads to the unrealistic premises of romantic pursuits. A comparison between the characters's distinctive attitude in two scenes concerning the same grey wall validates Chang's ン・チャン emphasis on individualism, but the abrupt change also reveal the underlying unrealistic nature of their romantic ending. The ideal state of love only exists in Chang's literary texts as a manifestation of her own expected vision, but deviates from plausible logic in real life.

Besides an examination of the plots and the foil of wartime settings, emphasis on individualism also registers through the elaborate description of delicate decorations and western recreations, which signal the hedonism and aestheticism of aristocrats and bourgeoisie. Exquisite portraits of romance and fetishism violate the social tread for patriotism and frugality. The conflict between individual propensity and public tendencies remains peculiar and controversial throughout Eileen Chang's works and earns her the title of "petite bourgeoisie." She actually does express her pride to identify herself as a "petite bourgeoisie" in "From the Mouths of Babes"—"whenever I see the term 'petite bourgeoisie,' I am promptly reminded of myself, as if I had a red silk placard hanging from my chest imprinted with these very words" (Written on Water 3). Disregarding political requirements for literature and boldly revealing her bourgeois addictions, Chang exceptionally fulfills her individualism by conducting art for art's sake and emphasizes literariness and aestheticism to realize her idealistic literary pursuits. Salient fetishism as an indication of aestheticism, along with constant individualism, in *Love in a Fallen City* also relates Eileen Chang's strong personal inclinations to inclusive descriptions in the novel, bringing about a double stress on individualism and aestheticism from both the author and the fiction per se.

4. "A NAME MUST BE RENAMED?"

In a material from "A Name Must Be Renamed?", Eileen Chang reflects on her proclivity in writing for focusing on daily objects, and disregards flamboyant literary expressions and sophisticated techniques:

I would rather keep my unbearably vulgar name in order to use it as a warning for myself. I try to get rid of the habit of biting and chewing the words the literature have; I want to find the reality of life in the logs, rice, cooking oil, salt, soap, water and sun. (Chang "A Name Must Be Renamed?")

As logs, rice, and salt signify everyday needs in Chinese culture, the material corresponds to the triviality in *Love in a Fallen City* repeated imageries of *Huqin*, mirror, actress, *qipao* and etc. Combining the western stream of consciousness with her acute perception in capturing details, Chang extends realistic depictions to a deliberate ambiguity of time, space, imagination and reality a singular mixture of attentive Chinese details and western illusions. In regard to her fervor for clothing and fashion, she elaborately describes her fetish for clothing in "From the Mouths of Babes":

There are some things I believe ought to belong to me simply because I am able to appreciate them better than anyone else. ...I dream night and day about a new outfit I have designed in my head, turning it over and over in my imagination, and when the time finally comes to buy materials, I stall, deliberating still more over the purchase to come. (Written on Water 3)

From the sources, Eileen Chang not only has an obsession with clothes, but also expresses a confident belief in her skills of appreciation and enthusiastic persistence to design an outfit. In her head, again and again, she imagines how to design the pattern, select the material, arrange decorations and tailor the fabric. A persevering process of mental-designing illustrates not only her personal pleasure in clothes, but also her insightful understanding of fashion design a representation of her aestheticism. She fabricates an intricate world of bright colors, lines and shapes on the fabric. In the introduction of *Written on Water*, Nicole Huang also mentions Chang's association of fashion with her aestheticism: "Chang's conceptualization of fashion as an everyday invention is another illustration of the distinctly material quality of her aesthetics" (Huang i). Description of Saheyini's clothes in *Love in a Fallen City* renders both Saheyini's temperament and Chang's aesthetic perspectives, resulting in a double embodiment of individualism of both the character and the author.

Under a dark, sheer cape she wore a long, close fitting gown, goldfish-red, that covered even her hands, leaving only her pearly fingernails exposed. The plunging necklace to her waist; it was the latest fashion from Paris, called "Ligne du Ciel." (75) "Saheyini came back down in an Indian outfit, trailing a gosling-yellow shawl long enough to touch the floor and covered with embossed silver thread flowers, each at least two inches in diameter." (77)

Saheyini's clothing style possesses conspicuous Indian features such as a sheer cape, decorated fingernails and a long shawl, which show her identity as an Indian and emit a strong sense of exotic beauty. She picks bright and shimmering colors such as

goldfish-red, pearly and gosling-yellow with silver and pearl so as to stand out among people and to catch the attention from males at their first sight. Eye-catching clothes substantiate her role as a social queen in Hong Kong, for her beauty and clothes attract male pursuers to support her life financially. The latest Paris fashion “Ligne du Ciel” embodies not only her and Eileen Chang’s astute sense of fashion, but also Saheyini’s wealth and refined taste as an indication of her identity as a princess, which public rumors always question.

5. CONCLUSION

Attentive depictions of fetishism and aestheticism reveal self-consciousness of both the character and the author, and dispel spontaneity. Too many mental constructions of imagery as a pursuit for aestheticism divert the story from the suffering, war, and disorder in real life. An impractical essence of aesthetic expression resonates with the unrealistic romance of individual expression. Adopting a politics of aestheticism and individualism, her novel deliberately lacks substance and correspondence with real life. Hence, her political perspective becomes apolitical to the public according to her unrealistic and untimely pursuits of love. Even though there is a war in the novel, “the presence of history is often concealed by masquerade, by an aesthetic that fuses inward gazing reverie with an orchestra of city sounds, described from the imagined margins of an endangered urban civilization” (Nicole Huang xii). Compared to dramatic romance and exquisite fetishism, the national event becomes of minor significance and withdraws to the background to accomplish Liu-su’s individual success in marriage. However, when evaluating one writer objectively, one cannot neglect either the literary flair or the political pragmatism of that writer. Especially for Eileen Chang, her unrealistic premises cannot cover her stylish words and refined tastes in her dramatic plots. Nothing can be more legendary than accomplishing love at the cost of the fall of an entire city. Bai Liu-su makes the legend in war-torn Hong Kong, and Eileen Chang makes her *Chuanqi* (legend) come true. An incident of national war realizes both Liu-su’s romance and Chang’s literary pursuit. In *Love in a Fallen City*, it borrows Japan’s invasion of Hong Kong to effectuate the love gamble between Bai Liu-su and Fan Liu-yuan, indeed representing a love affair in a fallen city.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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