



# Urban Experience and Self-awareness of Female Characters in Eileen Chang's Novels: A Case Study of Love in a Falling City

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**Abstract.** As a representative writer of Shanghai literature, Eileen Chang has created many female images in her novels. Through marriage, family and other themes, she shows the survival plight and spiritual burden of urban women in urban life from a female perspective, revealing her deep concern for women's survival. Taking *Love in a Falling City* as an example, through the protagonist Bai Liusu's "departure" and "return" in the urban experience under the background of Shanghai and Hong Kong twin cities, this paper expounds the relationship between the incomplete female self-consciousness and the urban experience behind it under the impact of the new and old in the typical Chinese transition period, and reflects the awakening and transformation of women's thoughts in the trend of The Times. It is of great significance to the pursuit of women's urban experience and self-consciousness.

**Keywords:** Zhang Ailing · *Love in a Falling City* · Bai Liusu · Urban experience · self-awareness

## 1 Introduction

With the rise of the high tide of urbanization in China, various literary thoughts coexist and enrich, and Shanghai literature, as an important aspect of urban literature, has entered the vision of researchers. Compared with other writers of the same period, the female images created by the writers of Shanghai School literature are interrelated with the city and modern life, revealing a new expression of urban civilization, which has important research value.

Taking Eileen Chang as an example, as one of the most representative writers in feminist literature in the 1940s, her works seem to open a new field of writing, namely the unfinished modern -- the period of social transformation in typical China. She not only devoted herself to personal writing, but also responded to social reality problems in a tortuous and profound way, focusing on women's self-survival under the impact of patriarchal culture and urban civilization. She reveals the entanglement between women and the city and the conflict between the new and the old from the family window of the narrative of Shanghai and Hong Kong twin cities, and reveals the profound revelation

of society, family and gender relations from the perspective of women. For a long time, relevant scholars and researchers have made deep and detailed studies on the analysis and discussion of female or male images in Eileen Chang's novels. However, from the perspective of urban literature, there is still room for the research on the correlation between female self-awareness reflection and urban experience.

## 2 Literature Review

In the study of Zhang Ailing's novel *Love in a Falling City*, the domestic research is mostly, but the foreign research is relatively lacking. There are 456 academic papers on CNKI, covering many aspects, such as translation theory perspective, narrative strategy perspective, female consciousness and so on.

Among them, the thesis on female consciousness has the following views: Peng Caiyun (2003) believes that the process of Bai Liusu getting rid of the fate of "mistress" reveals the selfish and utilitarian side of human nature. Yang Xiaolan (2004), from the perspective of "strong women", pointed out that Bai Liusu was not a tragic woman who was manipulated, dominated and played by men in the old society, but a new woman with independent personality and self-saving spirit. Tao Xiaohong (2009) compared the lonely life of Bai Liusu and Lin Daiyu, who were full of individuality, independent consciousness and struggle against fate. Zhang Ailing depicted the secular character Bai Liusu to express the desolation and helplessness after having a deep understanding of life and society. Bi Jing (2014) believes that *Love in a Falling City* is an ironic deconstruction of the romantic concepts of "free love" and "autonomous marriage" since the May 4th Movement and the narrative conventions of "Love at first sight". Rui Rong (2021) thinks that the women in the *Past and Love in a Falling City* go through different journeys of love, but they symbolize the same theme of "leaving". Although they have different characters and different life circumstances, they all show a certain enlightenment consciousness and independent personality. Li Junyan (2022), with *Jane Eyre* and *Love in a Falling City* as the main objects of investigation and female survival consciousness as the core of investigation, systematically presents women's attitude towards life and thinking about fate through comparative literary analysis and parallel research methods.

To sum up, studies on the correlation between female consciousness and urban experience are still lacking. Therefore, this paper tries to start with the female image of Bai Liusu in *Love of a Falling City*, combined with the chaotic historical background and the situation of twin cities at that time, to analyze the female image of Zhang Ailing's novels in the variation of traditional value system and the change of urban civilization in the self-awareness and urban experience, so as to explore the opposition conflict between ordinary women's enlightenment and urban survival in the 20th century. The author thinks about the female survival situation in modern urban life.

## 3 Shackle: The Situation of Two Cities Under the Background of the Times

Since modern times, with the invasion of the West, the urban economy of the coastal treaty ports was forced to develop, and gradually developed into a semi-feudal and semi-colonial social, cultural and literary form. In the 1930s and 1940s, the two international

metropolises, Shanghai, a semi-colonial Chinese and foreign mixed place, and Hong Kong, a colonial island, showed some similar urban living landscape and humanistic characteristics. On the surface, Shanghai carries on more of the old side, while Hong Kong presents a new side. But digging deeper into its roots, both Shanghai legend and Hong Kong foreign market society present an era of “the old things are collapsing and the new is growing”. In the collision and alternations of “the new” and “the old”, it shows the emptiness and despair generated by the trend of individual times in the period of social transformation. In the face of the context of *The Times*, Eileen Chang did not keep silent, nor did she follow the path of the May Fourth New literature, that is, the path of war. Instead, she used the path of citizen popular literature, starting from the personal perspective of daily life, to show the changes of *The Times* and embody the typical civil society in the transition period of China, where the new and the old are combined.

In *Love in a Falling City*, Eileen Zhang combines the daily life scenes of citizens with the urban experience to cleverly reflect the situation of the twin cities and the changes of *The Times*, as well as the grasp of humanity and the concern of the changes of *The Times*. For example, the attitudes and comments on Bai Liusu’s divorce expressed by various characters in *Bai Mansion* show that the old-style families in Shanghai are powerless in front of the new era. They cling to the old-style traditional ideas and even regard marriage and love as a means of investment and livelihood to shackle women. For example, in the fall of Hong Kong, the contrast of rich people’s lives, eating and drinking became a problem, to show the personal struggle and bondage in the era of war. At the same time, under the impact of urban civilization, the shackles of “money” are aggravating. Under this patriarchal system, women’s economy is not yet independent, and they lose the value of being independent as “human”, which leads to serious self-alienation of women, who can only humbly rely on men and be controlled and manipulated by them. “*The Times* are in a hurry, already in the process of destruction, there is still more destruction to come. One day our civilization, sublimated or flashy, will be a thing of the past. If ‘desolation’ is the word I use most often, it is because there is the threat of this vagueness in the background of thought.” On the surface, at the end of the story, Bai Liusu finally wins the victory in marriage, but in essence, she does not get rid of the feudal shackles and still cling to the original life of Fan Liu, leaving her wandering and lonely. Undoubtedly, Bai Liusu’s life is tragic, which is just a disease of *The Times* in the transitional period of Chinese society [1].

#### **4 Breakthrough: The “Real Chinese Woman”**

“Good or bad, I don’t want you to change. It’s rare to meet a real Chinese woman like you.” The so-called tradition, gentleness and attachment are the reasons why Bai Liusu attracts people from overseas to return to Fan Liuyuan. Is that true? Compared with traditional Chinese women, Bai Liusu chose a different way, which is also the breakthrough of her female consciousness in this new and old period, namely “divorce”. In the face of her husband’s violence in arranged marriage, she refused to be patient and obedient, chose to use the law to safeguard her rights, and even refused to “mourn” for her ex-husband, which is a step that Chinese women have longed for but lacked the courage to take for thousands of years. Just like the fourth grandma external temper hot

but in the face of the fourth grandpa's food, drink and piao gambling, she chose to obey and cling, she pointed out the disadvantages of Bai Liusu divorce, it is not revealed that it can not divorce the situation. Therefore, to a certain extent, it can be seen that the emerging female self-consciousness is forced to wake up on Bai Liusu [2].

As a new woman growing up in an old-style family, Bai Liusu wants to resist. She has been in the confrontation between tradition and modernity all her life. She sees through the unbreakable meaning of "Chinese tradition" and understands the dilemma of women's existence, so she simply gives up wasting energy on the struggle to challenge the tradition and concentrates on "marriage" as a job. Attempting to get a marriage with economic security through their own planning, in order to leave the feudal big family, this seems to be very modern, let her out of the decadent big family, came to the so-called "modern" society in Hong Kong, to get the long-desired life security and even a "harmonious and stable" marriage life.

## 5 Desolation: Women Struggle in Difficult Situations

It is the forced awakening of female self-consciousness that Bai Liusu has two contradictory characters of independence and compromise, which also creates the incompleteness of the development of her self-consciousness. She is still a traditional woman bound by the new and old society and urban culture. For example, the seemingly independent Bai Liusu could not bear the bullying and beating of her husband's family and got divorced angrily, but she still chose to return to the Bai Mansion, a place that she rejected and hated. She would rather endure the ridicule of her family than go out to work to support herself and lose her ladylike identity. Bai Liusu's body is still deeply imprinted with the "servility" of Chinese women. As the story begins, "the first two years, patchwork together, sell a field, still enough to eat for two years. Now can't do." When Bai Liusu came home after divorce and her brothers robbed the family, and the money ran out, they changed their warm appearance and began to sneer at Liusu, even acquiescing to his wife's criticism of his sister. In the patriarchal society where men control the economy, women can only humiliatingly choose a forced dependence road of earning a living first and then finding love. She chooses to resist, taking marriage as a means. The seemingly harmonious destination is another feudal shackle, that is, unable to be independent, she still faces the economic dilemma of relying on men to live. This kind of awakening of self-consciousness is not successful, it sprouted and then disappeared due to the shackles of The Times and personal choices, becoming a desolate female tragedy [3].

This "desolation" enveloped every character and every story in Eileen Chang's works. "Women... Women talk about men, read about men, complain about men all their lives, forever and ever..." Under the patriarchal social system, women become the weaker sex. Even if they want to resist, they are still shackled by feudalism. This dilemma of survival between the new and the old is vividly displayed in the transitional period of typical Chinese society. The seemingly successful "exodus" of women has been transformed into another form of "return". They have been placed in the weak position of "second sex" for a long time. If they develop self-awareness and want to have an intention for their own fate, it will not be very easy. This kind of liberation is not only shackled by The Times, but also requires the full development of female self-consciousness. It is still

a long and painful historical process for women to get rid of their own bad roots which are calm in the tradition and independent from the spirit [4].

## 6 Conclusion

Qian said: “As a female writer, Eileen Chang really understands the living situation of women in modern society. The environment women are in, the pressure they are under, the indifferent eyes of the old family, the fiddling of fate, and the spiritual burden of women themselves.” Deeply influenced by patriarchal culture, it is difficult and not easy for women to achieve self-independence in the real sense. Eileen Chang looks forward to the society from the unique perspective of women, and uses personal stories to see the great metaphors of the age symptoms. From the dual urban situation of Shanghai and Hong Kong, she reveals the collision between traditional women and the city, the conflict and entanglement between the new and the old, and shows the psychological struggle of women in the era of the transition of the old and the new in China for self-orientation. She thinks about women’s spiritual enlightenment and survival situation under modern urban civilization [5].

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