



The Metaphor and Breakthrough of Cinderella Image - on Zhang Ailing's 'Love in a Fallen City' and 'The First Burning Incense'

Tianyi Ma^{1,*}

¹ College of Literature, Chongqing Normal University, Chongqing, 401331, China

**Corresponding author. Email: 1433544071@qq.com*

Abstract. This paper takes the female characters of Ge Weilong in Zhang Ailing's novel "The First Incense" and Bai Liushu in "Love in a Fallen City" as the main research objects, using Propp's narrative theory, to explore how Zhang Ailing transforms and breaks through the image of Cinderella in fairy tales, thereby revealing the delicate emotions and life trajectory of women in love stories.

Keywords: Zhang Ailing, Cinderella, Anti-Love

1 Introduction

In Zhang Ailing's novels "The First Incense" and "Love in a Fallen City" she crafted the characters of Ge Weilong and Bai Liusu in the opening scenes to closely resemble the archetype of Cinderella from Grimm's Fairy Tales, as they both experience parental absence, conform to male expectations, and lack love or material status.

The absence of parents plays a crucial role in shaping female characters. Young women who are left without the care and guidance of their parents must bear thousands of times more physical and mental suffering and hardships than others in society. The decline of Cinderella's fate begins with the death of her mother and her father's remarrying and neglecting her. From that moment on, Cinderella no longer

has the protection of her parents and becomes a servant to her stepmother and her two stepsisters, suffering constant abuse. Looking back at the two female characters created by Zhang Ailing, Ge Weiling's parents are still alive, but the long distance between Shanghai and Hong Kong separates them, so her parents are also absent during her growth process from middle school. She relies on her aunt rather than her parents to provide her with financial support to complete her studies and daily living expenses, in exchange for which she obeys her aunt's arrangements and gradually becomes her "pet". Bai Liusu's situation is similar. In her declining feudal family, her father never appears, even her mother, from a financial perspective, urged her to return to her ex-husband's funeral, showing that blood ties and familial affection are worthless in the face of money.[1]The mother has never been a sheltering umbrella for her child, but rather a distant figure who only thinking about herself. From this perspective, the absence of parents does not only represent their physical death, but also means that they have not fulfilled their responsibilities of accompanying or supporting their children. Weiling, Liusu, and Cinderella are all writing their own personal destinies in such circumstances.

The characters' personalities are already set before the story begins, rather than being shaped as the narrative unfolds. Just like Cinderella, Ge Weiling and Bai Liusu also have personality traits that conform to male expectations. As everyone knows, Cinderella's character has a beautiful trait of being untainted by the mud, her mother taught her to be "faithful and kind forever"[2] before her death, and Cinderella indeed lived up to her mother's words, for example, when her father went out and ask the children what they wanted as a present, Cinderella only asked her father to bring back the first branch that touched his hat, and it was also because of her obedient and kind nature that Cinderella was able to get help from birds and eventually marry the prince. The description of Ge Weiling's obsession with love and self-deception is also clear, although Zhang Ailing only revealed it through the incident where a sailor mistook her as a prostitute at the end of the novel, leading her to say ironically, "How can there be no difference? They are forced, I am volunteered!" [3]It is clear that it is this type of character that conforms to male expectations that ultimately makes her a puppet who "helps her aunt entrap people and helps Qiao Qiqiao make money." Bai Liushu grew up in the feudal Bai Mansion, where she was groomed from an early age to be a submissive and weak-willed woman. Her trait, accurately assessed by Fan Liuyan as "your specialty is bowing your head," was exactly what deeply attracted the playboy Fan Liuyan's attention.

Cinderella is a classic example of someone who lacks love, material possessions, and status. Similarly, Ge Weilong and Bai Liusu also have deficiencies in these areas. Cinderella lacks love because her mother has passed away, she lacks material possessions because her stepmother and two stepsisters treat her as a servant, and she lacks status because she lives alone by the stove. However, the lack of everything has not diminished her confidence in life. After receiving help from a bird, Cinderella got elegant clothes and shoes and successfully entered the ball. She was favored by the prince at the ball many times and finally broke through all the obstacles to become the queen and gained love, material possessions, and status. Ge Weilong's deficiencies mainly lie in the area of love. A young girl's love is vague and expectant, so when she came into contact with Qiao Qiqiao in the realm of fame and profit, even though she knew that he was "not a remarkable person, but hard to deal with," [3] she was still deeply infatuated and could not extricate herself. She gave in to love and even had a relationship (sex) with Qiao Qiqiao. Liusu's deficiencies mainly lie in the areas of material possessions and status. Although she is the sixth daughter in the Bai Mansion, she still faces dissatisfaction from her brothers and sisters because of money. When her third brother had a face-to-face confrontation with her, he said, "You live in our house, eat our food, and drink our drinks. It used to be okay, just need adding a pair of chopsticks. But now, go and ask around, what's the price of rice?" "I don't mention money, you do!" [3] And not only that, in this family she had no status at all and was even considered a bad luck charm. The wife of her fourth sibling and her third brother teamed up to say, "As soon as she got married, her husband became a spendthrift. When she returned to her own home, it was obvious that her own family was going to be ruined - a born bad luck charm!" [3] Even her own mother didn't defend her daughter against others, but instead advised her to go back to her husband's home and adopt a son as a way to lighten her burdens in the future. In this situation, Bai Liusu urgently needed someone to rescue her from the "hell", and Fan Liuyuan was just the one. Ultimately, because of this relationship and marriage, Bai Liusu became a respectable wife who no longer had to worry about money.

In summary, the initial portrayal of Ge Weilong and Bai Liusu's backgrounds in the narrative, along with their predicaments and their parallels to Cinderella, establish the fundamental trajectory of the story. Simultaneously, this sets the stage for potential transformations in their identities.

2 Voluntary Life Choices

As a female author, Zhang Ailing actively portrayed the genuine dilemmas and choices faced by women in romantic relationships and marriage through the use of various techniques, including intricate psychological descriptions and poignant imagery, in order to subvert the 'Cinderella archetype'.

In the original Cinderella story, at critical junctures, Cinderella often assumes a passive and vulnerable stance, relying on external forces to navigate adversity rather than engaging in introspection or taking proactive measures. Following her mother's demise, she endured mistreatment from her stepmother and stepsisters, assuming the role of a maid to tend to their daily needs. Deprived of a proper bed and relegated to sleeping by the stove amidst ashes, she was denied access to education, social interaction, and even basic human rights. Confronted with such injustice, she refrained from asserting herself with valid arguments but instead acquiesced due to her perceived "virtuous qualities," silently enduring her plight while forming bonds with small animals. Furthermore, upon knowing that the king intended to invite all eligible ladies in the city for a ball where he would select his queen-to-be, Cinderella's stepmother instructed her to dress them up while setting deliberate traps: "If you can separate two full bowls of lentils from the ashes within an hour, you may accompany us." [2] Despite completing this task as directed by her stepmother's whimsy, Cinderella was unjustly barred from attending the ball and found solace only at her mother's grave beneath a hazelnut tree. Similarly when presented with an opportunity by the prince who sought out its rightful owner using a golden slipper as bait; once again she relied on pigeons for assistance in trying it on before being reunited with him. It is difficult not to ponder how Cinderella would have fared within that household without avian intervention. In Grimm's fairy tales female protagonists' autonomy and decision-making are marginalized during pivotal life events; their trajectories are largely shaped by external influences.

In Zhang Ailing's novels, Ge Weilong and Bai Liusu avoided this writing pattern, and female characters gradually tried to take control of their own fate. Ge Weilong's initial thoughts when she entered her aunt's home were, "As long as I act properly , I'm not afraid that she won't treat me with respect. Let people say whatever they want on the outside. I'll finish my school work. In the future, when I meet someone who likes me, they will naturally understand, and will never believe those boring rumors." [3] So she chose to ignore her aunt's reputation in order to complete her studies,

believing that as long as she did not associate with her aunt, she would not become one of those women in the whorehouse. On her first night at the Liang mansion, Ge Weilong faced the glittering clothes hanging in the closet with suspicion, but "she still had a childish side, and couldn't resist locking the door and trying on the clothes one by one, which all fit her. She suddenly realized that these were all the special clothes her aunt had prepared for her,"[3] and after realizing the truth, Weilong scoffed at it, but she couldn't resist the temptation of the beautiful clothes. "She didn't sleep all night. As soon as she closed her eyes, she would be dreaming about trying on clothes, trying on one after another." [3]In this way, she was immersed in this exotic atmosphere and began singing "The Night of Burma," literally walking into the path of decadence colonized by Qiao Qiqiao, the mestizo. [4] In her interactions with Qiao Qiqiao, Ge Weilong appeared to be a victim being played by him, but she still held her fate in her own hands. When she learned that Qiao Qiqiao's attitude towards marriage was "I am not prepared to get married. Even if I have the ability to get married, I am not worthy. I cannot be a satisfactory husband before the age of 50." "Weilong, I cannot promise you marriage, I cannot promise you love, I can only promise you happiness,"[3] she was willing to have a relationship with Joe Chiang despite the fact that it was far from what she had expected. She was not unaware of the irreversible consequences that such recklessness would bring, but she still chose "happiness".

Bai Liusu faced a series of challenges from Fan Liuyan. Initially, when Fan Liuyan requested Mrs. Xu to invite Bai Liusu to Hong Kong, she made a bold decision, taking a risk on her future: "If she failed, it would tarnish her reputation and disqualify her as the stepmother of five children. If she succeeded, she could attain the desired object of affection - Fan Liuyuan - and release her pent-up frustration."[3] Upon receiving the invitation from Fan Liuyan, she courageously embarked on the journey to Hong Kong. However, upon arrival in Hong Kong, reality set in as she was regarded as "Mrs. Fan." She soon realized that Fan Liuyuan was purposefully displaying intimate gestures in public to prevent any denial of their relationship thus trapping her with no option but to become his mistress without being able to return home or see her parents. Bai Liusu took a step back and returned to Shanghai while awaiting Fan Liuyuan's next move before ultimately enduring his invitation. This dynamic interplay between them involved testing each other's limits, with Bai Liusu responding to Fan Liuyuan's challenges with just the right amount of composure.

Each woman's environment is different, and the challenges she faces are different. What is important is to maintain inner courage and determination, so that the difficulties can be overcome.[5] In contrast to Cinderella's portrayal of weakness and submission, Zhang Ailing's characters, Ge Weilong and Bai Liusu, exhibit agency in navigating their own destinies amidst life and love choices. Despite encountering constraints, they transcend the conventional Cinderella archetype to emerge as proactive and multifaceted female figures in her narratives.

3 The Fateful Endings of Joys and Sorrows

The Cinderella story is a classic representation of romantic and pure love. The prince and Cinderella are destined to be a pair, and their love is genuine and free of any entanglements of self-interest. In contrast, Zhang Ailing depicted the real situation of female love through characters such as Ge Weilong and Bai Liusu. Love, after all, is nothing more than the veil of feudal society and the choice of interests. The novels "The First Incense" and "Love in a Fallen City," are a deconstruction of love stories, and Ge Weilong and Bai Liusu are a rebellion against the "Mary Sue" image.

In the Cinderella story, with the help of birds, the prince recognized the girl wearing the golden shoes as his dance partner at the ball, the one he fell in love with at first glimpse. In the end, they got married and lived a happy life. Through a series of trials, Cinderella, with her beautiful qualities, received external help and thus achieved a fulfilling love, escaping from poverty and becoming the queen of the nation, gaining status and power. Everything was so perfect that it was unreal, and it could be considered a model of a love story.

The love story between Ge Weilong and Bai Liusu was not that smooth. And while they gained love, they also lost something. Ge Weilong fell deeply in love with Qiao Qiqiao and, after having sex with him, she comforted herself by saying, "His love and her love have different ways." [3] Ge Weilong was willing to be subordinate in this relationship, and she always found ways to convince herself. However, she was still dealt a harsh blow by reality: "The two of them heard the dog barking upstairs, and when they looked up, they saw Weilong. They had no time to hide, and she had already recognized Qiao Qiqiao and Nier's faces." [3] The person she loved was flirting with her maid Nier after having sex with her. This blow was so devastating that it revealed all the frustrations and resentments that Weilong had been hiding: "Weilong clenched her hands tightly and kept hitting things randomly. Nier just

dodged and didn't defend herself or plead for mercy." Other young maids who were present defended Nier, but Nier sighed and said, "Just leave her alone! She's also quite pitiful." [3] Just those words were enough to break the emotional barrier of a teenage girl. "She hit Nier hard again and threw the towel away. She collapsed to the edge of the bathtub, holding her face and crying loudly." [3] From that moment on, Wai Lung's fantasy of love was shattered.

Unlike the prince of Cinderella, Qiao Qiqiao was a genuine playboy who was indifferent to responsibility and had a wandering eye. He wooed Ge Weilong with flattery and was involved with other girls at the same time. When all the facades were removed, Qiao Qiqiao was nothing more than a spoiled rich kid who was not welcome at home, needed money, and was promiscuous. Despite her aunt's advice, Wei Long insisted on returning to Shanghai to become a new person, but she couldn't let go of everything here, not just her feelings for Qiao Qiqiao, but also her attachment to a wealthy lifestyle and the glamorous world. As her aunt said, "You came here alone. You're leaving here alone. You've changed, and your home must change too. You can't go back to your old environment." [3] Weilong was not unaware of her downward spiral, but she didn't want to admit that she could no longer believe that she could remain untainted by the muddy waters as long as she walked straight and sat upright. She had no choice but to go down this path. The ending of the story saw Wei Long seemingly wealthy and well-positioned, but in reality, she had become a pawn used by her aunt to entrap people and by Qiao Qiqiao to obtain money. It was so cruel that Weilong due to her failure in love, had become a puppet in the love and money games of Qiao Qiqiao and her aunt. The descent of Weilong's love cannot escape the imprisonment of The Times, and her story ends with a tragic ending. [6]

The stories of Bai Liusu and Ge Weilong are both based on love, but their emotional journeys and outcomes are quite different. Ge Weilong's feelings for Qiao Qijiao were genuine, while Bai Liusu's were not. She saw Fan Liuyuan as a lifeline that could rescue her from her feudal family, so even though she knew that "he was young when he was shocked by something, and gradually went astray, indulging in gambling, drinking, and other vices, with no interest in family happiness." [3] she did not prevent him from becoming her candidate. From the very beginning, Bai Liusu approached Fan Liuyuan deliberately with the intention of getting married. Whether he truly loved her or not did not matter to her. What he said to her, she did not believe a word of it. For Bai Liusu, Fan Liuyuan was her bargaining chip for leaving her

original family and gaining social status. The emotional entanglement between Bai Liusu and Fan Liuyuan was a complete game of chance and a struggle of love, with both constantly testing each other's limits. After arriving in Hong Kong for the first time, the feelings between Bai Liusu and Fan Liuyuan quickly heated up, with the exception of one occasion when Bai Liusu felt she had gained a deeper understanding of Fan Liuyuan and went to the beach to pass the time, only to be offended by him and he did not come up to her. Later, Fan Liuyuan spent a few days with Saheiyini and decided to cool down his relationship with Bai Liusu. After they reconciled, Bai Liusu appeared to be a bit warmer towards him on the surface, but in her heart, she thought, "He made her jealous on purpose, using a tactic to force her to throw herself into his arms. She would have never loved him, nor loved him late, but chose this moment to love him, sacrificing herself for no reason. He would certainly not appreciate it, thinking that she had fallen for his plan... It's obvious that he wants her, but he doesn't want to marry her,"[3] as she thought of this, Bai Liusu couldn't help but grit her teeth and hate him. Thus, the two of them struggled, and Bai Liusu finally couldn't accept the fact that others had already called her Mrs. Fan and returned to Hong Kong in a fit of anger. After coming to Hong Kong for the second time, Liusu completely abandoned the image of the proud young lady before, and willingly became the mistress of Fan Liuyuan. [7] Fan Liuyuan decided to go to Britain, so he rented a house for her. However, the peaceful days didn't last long before they were broken by gunshots. Because they didn't have any rice at home, Bai Liusu also didn't have any acquaintances, and she almost died several times. Ironically, Fan Liuyuan just happened to return at this time, perhaps because of the war, "She didn't know anything else, but at this moment, she only had him, and he only had her." [3] The two of them actually developed some genuine feelings for each other. "He was merely a selfish man, and she was merely a selfish woman. In this chaotic era, individualists have no place to exist, but there is always a place for an ordinary couple." They got married during the time of war. However, for Bai Liusu, although it was fortunate to become Mrs. Fan, the reason for their marriage was not purely due to love, which could not help but cause Bai Liusu a slight sense of regret: "Liuyuan never played jokes with her now. He saved his wit for other women. It was a fortunate sign that he regarded her as a legitimate wife - the proper wife. But Liusu was still a little regretful. The fall of Hong Kong fulfilled her. But in this unreasonable world, who knows what causes and effects are?"

Zhang Ailing's incisive portrayal has rendered GeWeilong and Bai Liusu as embodiments of anti-romanticism. One is ensnared by the pursuit of love, succumbing to the influence of wealth and power, while the other fails to prioritize love as the paramount virtue. Their fates are even more disheartening than Cinderella's fairy-tale ending, vividly illustrating the poignant experiences of women in romantic relationships.

4 Conclusion

Zhang Ailing utilized her distinctive feminine perspective, refined writing style, and personal life experiences to subvert and transcend the Cinderella archetype in fairy tales. In contrast to Cinderella, the characters she depicted, such as Bai Liushu and Ge Weilong, exhibited a sense of incompleteness. Their development unfolded amidst parental absence, dearth of affection and material wealth, and conformity to male expectations through their interactions with female figures within this milieu. They displayed a palpable resignation when confronted with life choices, culminating in unsatisfactory denouements for their narratives. As Summer Zhixiqing observed, "Beneath her veneer of humor lies profound sorrow—a universal lament over the futility and hollowness of human passions." [8] Zhang Ailing's rendition of the Cinderella narrative emerges as a realistic portrayal of anti-romanticism.

References

1. Wang Jianwen: "The Precious City" and Zhang Ailing's Search for Self and Entrapment in Self, *Youthful Years*, 2021, p. 44-45.
2. Grimm: "The Complete Grimm's Fairy Tales", Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House, 2008, p. 70.
3. Zhang Ailing: "Love in a Fallen City," Beijing: Beijing October Arts and Literature Publishing House, 2012.
4. Fu Lizhong: "Eileen Chang Remembers the Apocalypse of Atlantis: The First Incense Inherits the Literary Heritage of Salome and the Impression of Stanley Ho", *Modern Chinese Journal*, 2020, p. 48.

5. Zhao Hanwen, "The Tragedy of Love and Marriage in Zhang Ailing's Novels: A Case Study of The Love of the Falling City and the First Incense", *Jiaying Literature*, 2024, p. 26.
6. Zheng Minsi: "Struggling and Sinking: The Interpretation of the First Incense of Agarwood Dust from the Perspective of Psychoanalysis", *Jingu Wenchuang*, 2022, p. 18.
7. Zhang Xiaoling, Cui Feng: "Love in a Fallen City" from the Perspective of Overseas Chinese Studies: Five Overseas Chinese Migrations of Bai Liusu ", *Social Science Forum*, 2024, p. 211.
8. Xia Zhiqing, "A History of Modern Chinese Fiction," Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2001, p. 338.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

