



Immersion and Transcendence: A Cross-Cultural Dialogue Between Eileen Chang's Literary Narrative and Simone de Beauvoir's Gender Theory

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Abstract. This paper examines the divergent explorations of female liberation pathways within Simone de Beauvoir's philosophical framework and Eileen Chang's literary narratives. The philosophy *The Second Sex* published in mid-twentieth century drew on the idea of "othering" as Beauvoir showed that women are framed as othering as opposed to men and that the liberation of women depends on the ability to go beyond othering and become self-defining subjects. Meanwhile, with the help of novels *The Golden Cangue*, *Love in a Fallen City*, and *Lust, Caution*, Eileen Chang revealed the tragedies of women in the world of men. As argued in this paper, Beauvoir offers theoretical foundations of female liberation, which is economic self-sufficiency and political position. Chang however, portrays the fall of women, the historical boundaries of liberation. They are not mutually exclusive in their arguments: Beauvoir provides the transcendent enlightenment and Chang the concrete and unresolved dilemmas of female liberation under the structural oppression.

Keywords: Eileen Chang; Beauvoir; Othering; Female Liberation; structural oppression

1 Introduction

The 20th century experienced almost an awakening of worldwide consciousness in the literature and philosophy of women. Simone de Beauvoir and Eileen Chang both in the West and the East, respectively, demonstrated the dilemma and struggle of women in patriarchal systems in a unique manner. Though situated in distinct cultural contexts—one in Republican China with war, the other in post-war France—both authors converged in their focus on how women might shed their status as the Other to become free, autonomous subjects.

Yet, differences also emerged within the perspectives of Eileen Chang (Hereafter referred to as Chang) and Simone de Beauvoir (Hereafter referred to as Beauvoir). This paper employs transcendence and immersion to represent two states of female subjectivity within Beauvoir's philosophy and Chang's literary narratives. The transcendence that Beauvoir highlights is not just some existential idea of philosophy, but an ethical

practice that requires women to be active in history and to subvert the patriarchal order to realise self-worth by doing and being free. However, in the plays of Chang, be it Bai Liusu in *Love in a fallen city*, or Cao Qiqiao in the *Golden Cangue*, women are often limited by the authority of the colonial metropolis, war experience and old-fashioned morality. Necessitated to take expedient decisions in between marriage, wealth and survival tactics, their independent wills are in the end overwhelmed by reality. Chang makes palpable the passive loss of the female sexuality, using elaborate symbolism and banal imagery and a narrative method of immersion, creating a condition of existential dilemma between clarity and desperation, what can be described as “immersion”.

2 Literature Review

In existing scholarly research, Chang’s writing is frequently situated within the context of colonial modernity. Indicatively, Chen and Li (2023) [7] observe the subtlety of her narratives in unravelling the negation of culture and influence between the cultures and the metropolis of colonialism. By following a postcolonial approach, Yuan et al. (2023) [22] consider how music has been used as a tool of raising feminine consciousness in her stories. Speaking of Beauvoir, scholar Moi (1999) [5] also highlighted the importance of her theory of othering, saying that her ethics of existentialism established a philosophical foundation of the modern gender problems and the theory of gender performance created by Butler (Provost, 2023) [15]. However, current literature fails in providing a cross-cultural view of dialogue such that the literary narrative system developed by Chang is not investigated in comparison to Beauvoir and her “othering” (Beauvoir, 1949) [1] and transcendence of subjectivity theories. Most importantly, it has not radically investigated the literature imagery reaction of Chang to the theories of Beauvoir or the critical efficacy and drawbacks of the theories by Beauvoir in certain context of power relations. It is this gap that this paper is intended to cover.

3 Methodology

Based on the gender theory presented by Beauvoir and comparative literary and philosophical analysis, the paper will reconsider female stories in literature by Chang, with the central aspect concerning the dilemma of women liberation in the Republic of China. The question can be as follows: What dialectical discussion arises between Beauvoir “transcendence” (Beauvoir, 1949) [1] and the struggles of the women in China? It discusses her abstract concept of liberation in structural oppression, based on the ideas of Beauvoir, “becoming a woman” and “transcendence”. In contrast, it dwells on the survival tactics of such characters as Bai Liusu in *Love in a Fallen City*, Ge Weilong in *The First Incense Burner* and Cao Qiqiao in *The Golden Cangue* by looking carefully at the symbols, imagery, and narrative mechanisms used in urban fiction by Chang. This shows how Chang uses literary means to augment, update or even ironically undermine the liberation theory of Beauvoir finally showing that the two philosophies lead in the same philosophical nature in their quest of female liberation.

4 Results

4.1 Chang: Literary Representation of Female Experience

Being a figure of the modern Chinese literature, Chang received universal recognition of her unique feminine vision, subtle expressions of emotions and a deep social understanding. Her writings are a clear expression of changes that were taking place in the Chinese society in the middle of the twentieth century during the tensions between tradition and modernity, Eastern and Western world. This is especially in the colonial setting of Republican Shanghai and Hong Kong where she developed a literary style that was both realistic and sympathetic.

The literary work of Chang is heavily grounded in her historical and cultural surroundings. She acquired acute classes and the identity anxieties in her novels—they were based in the colonial environment and concession system of 1930s–1940s Shanghai. Power relations represented in *Love in a Fallen City* are symbolized in colonial Hong Kong, and Li (2024) [14] observes how Chang examines the interplay of traditional and modern civilisation through spatial writing. War experiences aggravated her work, and in Shanghai, under Japanese occupancy, she experienced social disintegration and the unpredictability of fate, which is evident in her treatment of themes of chance and absurdity in *The Blockade* (Du, 2025) [9]. Chang had a strong influence of traditional ethics on the way she depicted the fate of women; for instance, the tragedy of Cao Qiqiao in *The Golden Cangue* is due to being confined to marriage and family power, as investigated by Gu (2023) [10]. The combination of colonial modernity, war memory, and Confucian ethics resulted in Chang placing individual psychology in history, which created her incisive, detached narrative style.

4.2 Beauvoir: Philosophical Framework of Female Liberation.

Being one of the most outstanding French philosophers and one of the prominent feminists of the twentieth century, Simone de Beauvoir based her thought on existentialism philosophy. Through her relationship with Jean-Paul Sartre, she came to a distinctive understanding of freedom and self-awareness. In *The Second Sex*, she argued that gender is not a product of biological differences, but instead the result of the combined forces of social, cultural, and historical factors; Women are defined by male society as the “Other” (Beauvoir, 1949) [1], subordinated and objectified by man through this role. The main tenet of the Beauvoir’s feminist argument is therefore that women’s liberation can only come about through rejecting the role of the Other, being self-defined subjects, and the call for true freedom through economic autonomy and social change.

Beauvoir’s theory was born in the aftermath of the Second World War, and she asserted that modern society could be changed through reason and action. However, the Shanghai and Hong Kong portrayed by Chang were situated in the ruins and the process of the old and new, and in the absence of the historical context in which the stories of Chang’s urban sets were situated, the theory of transcendence became a paradox that

could not be achieved. In her stories set in cities, Chang made eerily prescient observations about the destiny of modern Chinese women. Chang revealed female alienation in male-dominated societies through characters such as Bai Liusu and Cao Qiqiao, whilst Beauvoir philosophically deconstructed the social construction of the “other” identity. Their works provide a foundation for understanding both the universality and particularity of gender oppression.

5 Discussion

5.1 Shared Themes: Portraying the Dilemma of Female Othering

Though Chang and Beauvoir depict women’s predicaments differently, both profoundly reveal the fate of women being othered under patriarchy. Beauvoir points out in *The Second Sex*, “that women are not born, but made” (Beauvoir, 1949, p. 267) [1], and it is social construction of female identity. Her theoretical approach demonstrates the ways women are deprived of agency and demoted to appendages, whereas Chang uses the literary devices, especially metaphor, symbolism, and synaesthesia, to represent the situation in her work of fiction writing.

From Chang’s early works *The Love of a Fallen City* and *Lust, Caution* to her later pieces *The Golden Cangue* and *Withering Flowers*, Chang’s writing reflects an aesthetic shift from emotional exploration to austere realism. She denied the fact that female liberation was a political discourse, but she made her women be in the middle of marriage markets, family power, and sexual transactions. However, unlike the awakening being tied to the revolution as in the case of the Ding Ling in the book *The Diary of Miss Shafei*, Chang reveals the survival of women in the patriarchal, monetary, and wartime systems. The heroines of her *Legend* and *rumour* go beyond rebellion or victimhood and represent complex calculating strength.

Synaesthesia becomes a crucial vehicle for expressing female emotions and existential conditions in Chang’s writing. In *The Golden Cangue*, Cao Qiqiao looks at plum juice and visualizes, drop by “drop dripping down... soon to spoil”, in which material and sensual experience blend to imply her extreme material and emotional loss (Chang, 1943) [2]. In *Love in a Fallen City* the cheongsam that Bai Liusu “wore fit her body, cold, and wet as paper”, and the sense of touch and image reveal her weakness and restrictions. In *Lust, Caution*, Wang Jiazhi listens to the sound of the “card table mah-jong tiles, which is jade-green” (Chang, 2017) [4]. This auditory-visual transposition is symptomatic of the quandary of national and personal emotions intertwined together. This sensory fusion does not only intensify the emotional level to which the text is attached, but also it deeply shows the alienated experiences of women in oppressions.

Chang also adeptly employs everyday imagery to symbolise women’s objectification and repressed desire. In *Love in a Fallen City*, the suggestion of commodification of the female body in the marriage market is seen through the fact that Bai Liusu wears “a pale moon-white gown of sheer gauze” (Chang, 2007) [3]. According to Stolovy (2024) [19], clothing functions significantly in mediating body-image and objectification processes. In *The Golden Cangue*, most emblematic is the presence of the so-called “golden shackles”. The gold bracelet is not only the symbol of wealth and gold but also

the incarcerated symbol of the whole existence of Cao Qiqiao. These pictures not only carry the burden of the predicaments of women but also act as channels through which they self-criticize and introspect.

Through characters like Cao Qiqiao, Chang brutally illustrates the process by which women are othered and internalise their oppression. Cao Qiqiao was being traded as a commodity at a young age; she was censoring herself in the patriarchal home after marriage. However, when she got financial strength, liberation was not her way. Rather, she used the golden chains to break the happiness of her children to continue the reasoning of oppression. This so-called “authentic revolt” that, according to the theory of Beauvoir, should become the foundation of subjectivity, turns into a ridiculous tragedy in the writing of Chang. “Her subjectivity ... is an altar constructed on the bones of others” (Zhao, 2022) [23] which is a literary irony to the liberationist suggestion of Beauvoir. Equally, in *Lust, Caution*, the “authentic revolt” of Wang Jiazhi in liberating Mr. Yee ends up destroying herself; in *The Red and the White Rose*, the awakening of Wang Jiaorui nevertheless fails to free her of male bondage. Chang brings out the fact that in a patriarchally coded symbolic structure, women deemed to have undergone self-realisation can be just as much the re-enactment of previous roles, which do not overcome structural oppression.

Chang and Beauvoir bring a mutual light on the predicament of othering on women. By introducing the idea of “complicity” whereby women by long-term oppression internalise male values and are actively involved in embracing and playing the “other” role assigned by society, and thus, engaging in their own alienation, Chang works also show how the value of existence of women is still circumscribed in the masculine world. Their joint production condemns patriarchy: Beauvoir theorises, whereas Chang reveals the institutional and practical predicament.

5.2 Differing Perspectives: Contrasting Understandings of Feminine Liberation

Beauvoir’s philosophy of liberation stands in stark contrast to Chang’s pessimistic narratives. In Beauvoir’s theory, women can subvert patriarchal order and break free from their cages through collective agency (Huda, Nawaz, Khalid, & Azmat, 2025; Lamoureaux, 2021) [11] [13]. Chang, moreover, portrays the triviality of individual women in war and colonialism (Strazzeri, 2024) [20]. According to Beauvoir *The Second Sex* women have to reject the gender roles constructed by culture and reclaim the subject through action since women are historical beings (Chiasoka, 2023; Rodriguez Alvarez, 2025) [8] [17]. This opposition brings out the way in which narratives in Chang play out structural limits that have constrained the agency of women in social spaces over time.

In Eileen Chang’s fiction, the self-will of female characters often dissolves into an illusory façade by the narrative’s conclusion. This disguise, employed as a survival strategy, is imbued with absurdity (Cai, 2022) [6]. Unlike Simone de Beauvoir’s transcendence, the female destinies in Chang’s works manifest a state of immersion, trapped in the bewilderment of their specific predicaments. Chang concretises women’s predicaments through othered female figures in her literary works. In *Love in a Fallen*

City, the city's destruction facilitates Bai Liusu's marriage, suggesting women's destinies are often dictated by shifts in external power structures (Gu, 2023) [10]. In *The Red and the White*, the sensual incarnation Wang Jiaorui and the disciplined model wife Meng Yanli both meet ruin by embracing male-defined values (Xu & Ma, 2023) [21]. Their divergence between Chang and Beauvoir is therefore a matter of universal and particular: Beauvoir gives us a formula for female emancipation and Chang comes to remind us of the constraints of the universality of theory when faced with historical circumstances (Qin, 2024) [16]. Chang claims that women are not subjected to the evil of an individual but to profound structural oppression in an unalterable society. It is incredibly powerful, and it becomes incredibly hard to overcome or even desire to gain freedom (Qin, 2024) [16]. This is why Chang wonders whether it is even possible that female subjectivity can exist under such circumstances (Xu & Ma, 2023) [21]. Her fiction, therefore, reveals the limitations of agency in women due to historical, social and cultural set ups.

Chang narratives materialize the abstract concept of othering by echoing the design of oppression within definite historical and cultural setups. The topic of republican Shanghai and colonial Hong was not merely the subject of interpersonal domination, but it was deeply impacted by the conflict of colonial modernity, war and economy, and indigenous moral orders (Xu & Ma, 2023) [21]. In this deconstruction, Chang presents the idea that personal projects of transcendence are more likely to be bound and female subjectivity must bargain in a world where structural forces are immovable, omnipresent, and oppressive (Gu, 2023) [10]. Chang, thus, raises a very crucial question: to what degree can female subjectivity be achieved when structural and historical conditions are exceedingly deterministic? Chang literature demands that such generality of theory is not enough to describe the individual life of women under the pressure of historical structure.

The divergence between Chang and Beauvoir thus illuminates a tension between the universalist vision of liberation and the particularity of historical circumstances. Beauvoir is able to offer a philosophical paradigm of emancipation, focusing on ethical agency and the possibility of transformation (Joseph, 2024) [12]. By contrast, Chang bases the discussion on lived experience and finds that in warlike, colonialist, and deeply patriarchal conditions, agency in women is frequently limited, and liberation is conditional, risky, and dependent on circumstance (Shen, 2025) [18]. Collectively, their views focus on the dynamics of theory and praxis—where Beauvoir develops the ideal of transcendence, Chang questions the restriction of that ideal to socio-historical conditions, showing that the struggle of women towards subjectivity is diverse, contradictory, and usually tragic. This contrast highlights how Chang's narratives illuminate the constraints imposed on female agency by historical, social, and structural realities.

6 Conclusion

In this paper, women's existential condition in structural oppression and the theory of liberation are explored and compared through Chinese writer, Eileen Chang and French philosopher, Simone de Beauvoir. Both these two female intellectuals of the twentieth

century use different disciplines as their lenses to their subjects, but in tandem, they attack the heart of patriarchy and how it works as a complicit mechanism that reduces women to the Other and forces women to accept their fate.

Beauvoir, as a philosopher, set the stage for feminist theory and the liberation of women from their otherness into transcendence. Chang, as a novelist, bore witness to the real-life dilemmas faced along this journey to subjectivity. Materialised in the “golden shackles” and interwoven psychic descriptions of synesthesia, Chang exposes the arduous and comical difficulty faced by the individual woman in shedding her subjectivity in the face of the triple oppression of colonialism, war, and tradition. Chang’s novel is the complement to Beauvoir’s theory that true freedom of liberation cannot overlook the complexity of power relations or risk the tragedy of gaining one set of shackles while breaking another.

Chang compared to Beauvoir, she answered why do we need transcendence. The reason Chang was plunged into that historical situation, historical relationship, and specific character is that she showed us in which situation women cannot transcend their historical conditions. While Chang complemented Beauvoir’s theory with the gender oppression part in Eastern society’s historical background; gave us concrete feminist researcher examples and more critical background analysis. The similarities and differences between Chang and Beauvoir created more feminist research examples.

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