



Girlhood on the Edge: A Comparative Study of Adolescent Female Experience in Elena Ferrante and Eileen Chang

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Abstract. Although Elena Ferrante and Eileen Chang wrote within the contexts of postwar Italy and the Republic of China respectively, both authors display sustained attention to the experiences of adolescent girls. This article departs from existing scholarship by tracing each writer's trajectory independently and, for the first time, establishing a systematic comparative study of their work from the perspective of girlhood. It concentrates on three interrelated axes, including private forms of communication within same-sex communities, the construction of teenage identity in relation to popular culture, and the ambivalent dynamics of rivalry and intimacy among female peers. The study demonstrates that Ferrante represents girlhood as a flowing and spiraling emergence rendered through an immersive interior perspective, whereas Eileen Chang frequently approaches girlhood from the stance of loss and elegy. This comparison not only addresses a lacuna in specialized scholarship on Chinese and Italian women's writing but also offers concrete textual evidence in support of comparative literary practice grounded in cross-cultural dialogue.

Keywords: Girlhood, Female Adolescence, Elena Ferrante, Eileen Chang, Comparative Literature.

1 Introduction

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, works published under the pseudonym Elena Ferrante have generated a surge of international scholarship, especially following the publication of the *Neapolitan Novels* and subsequent screen adaptations [1]. Eileen Chang (1920-1995), known in Chinese as Zhang Ailing, has sustained scholarly attention for decades as a central figure in twentieth-century Chinese literature [2]. Although Ferrante and Chang emerge from different linguistic and national traditions and wrote at different historical moments, the generational distance between Ferrante's authorial persona and Chang is only one or two decades, and many of their principal texts engage the historical conjuncture surrounding the Second World War. Crucially, both writers are deeply invested in the representation of female subjectivity and the examination of girls and young women within social networks. Their narratives recurrently explore the

presence and absence of girlhood, the semiotic expressions of youth, and the shaping influence of popular culture, same-sex communities, and adult women on adolescent female subjects.

Existing scholarship has not yet produced a dedicated comparative study of girlhood in the works of these two authors. This article addresses that gap by comparing Ferrante's and Chang's narrative strategies for depicting girlhood, identifying convergences and divergences, and assessing the value of such a comparison for comparative literature. The principal contribution is the establishment of a parallel analysis of Ferrante and Chang from the perspective of girlhood, thereby filling a lacuna in Sino-Italian studies of women's writing, foregrounding cross-cultural heterogeneity, and offering interpretive resources for understanding the alienation of female experience in conditions of globalization and urbanization.

2 Literature Review

At the end of the eighteenth century, Britain experienced the social transformations of the Industrial Revolution. Within this context, the fiction of Jane Austen and the three Brontë sisters exhibited distinct familial orientations and extended, candid psychological description, thereby delineating a vernacular of female communal life that diverged from dominant literary modes of the period [3]. These works register an incipient form of girlhood writing within a nascent feminist literary tradition, insofar as the experiences of adolescent girls begin to appear as narratively distinct from adult female trajectories. Nonetheless, this tradition long remained unable to disentangle girlhood from the broader category of female development, and adolescence was frequently represented as merely a transitional phase toward maturity, with its specificities insufficiently theorized.

Western feminist literary models were introduced to China in the early twentieth century. Chinese modern women writers influenced by the May Fourth Movement, such as Ding Ling, attended to women's experience while more often embedding the growth of young women within broader narratives of revolution and romantic commitment [4]. Such alignments suggest that girlhood narratives were frequently subsumed within masculinist discourses of national transformation, thereby obscuring the singularity of adolescent female experience.

Although Chang is commonly associated with Shanghai-style fiction, critical attention since the late twentieth century has reconceptualized her as an autonomous literary figure whose work transcends school affiliation. Chang's treatments of female friendship are particularly incisive. Some scholars argue that Shanghai-school modernist literature, whose cultural lifeblood is irrationalism, functioned as an avant-garde current in modern Chinese literature and served as a conduit for twentieth-century Western literary and cultural trends into modern China [5]. Chen (2015) described Chang as a relatively heterogeneous force, a literary presence that bridges elevated dissent and quotidian politics [6]. While such scholarship highlights Chang's modernity, avant-garde impulses, and political aesthetics, there remains little sustained inquiry into the stage-

specific contours of girlhood in her work as an autonomous category distinct from general narratives of female maturation.

Concurrently, in the past decade the *Neapolitan Novels* has achieved international prominence and elicited extensive critical engagement with the oeuvre attributed to Elena Ferrante. Ferrante is often credited with foregrounding female relationality, and the author's narrative methods, though not formally experimental, reinvestigate modes of interiority [1]. Her fiction elevates female friendship from the private sphere to the structural center of narrative, thereby rendering girlhood a salient pathway for apprehending female subjectivity. Yet existing scholarship has predominantly examined Ferrante's texts in isolation or through feminist theoretical lenses, without a systematic cross-cultural comparison with analogous Eastern traditions.

In sum, current scholarship exhibits several lacunae. The Western feminist literary lineage established the embryonic conditions for girlhood writing but did not consolidate girlhood as a discrete scholarly focus. In the Chinese context, the girlhood narrative has frequently been absorbed into nationalist and modernist discourses, an omission evident in studies of Chang. Although Ferrante scholarship is substantial, it lacks systematic cross-cultural parallelism. This paper therefore undertakes a comparative analysis of Ferrante and Chang with respect to their representations of girlhood, aiming to identify convergences and divergences and to address these gaps in the existing literature.

3 Manifestations of Girlhood

3.1 Closed and Private Communication in Same-Sex Communities

Female peer networks frequently display a greater degree of subtlety, complexity and instability than male peer groups during the formation of adolescent subjectivity, and they serve as principal sites for the emergence and articulation of girlhood. In Ferrante's *The Lying Life of Adults*, Giovanna's intimate affiliation with Angela and Ida exemplifies a long-standing, insular circle in which shared curiosity about parental lives, the imitation of adult conduct and the mutual provocation of transgressive behavior shape the girls' collective imagination [7]. Giovanna's narrative performance of Aunt Vittoria's romantic history and her invention of an invented lover register both vanity and a limited capacity for self-reflection. Comparable dynamics recur across Ferrante's *Neapolitan Novels*, where Lenù and Lila cultivate forms of exchange that are intensely private and linguistically marked, and in which educational and social inequalities generate rivalrous affect and intermittent jealousy within otherwise close triadic or dyadic constellations [8].

Chang's short story "Aloeswood Incense: The Second Brazier" stages a different facet of closed female communication, one that is inflected by cultural tutelage and social hypocrisy. The heroine Su Xi's naïve understanding of sex and courtship is mediated largely through the curtailed reading available to her mother and through the example of her similarly educated sister, Mi Lisheng, such that the erotic ideals and moral pronouncements endorsed by male interlocutors like Roger are revealed as conventional and brittle under scrutiny [9]. Chang's account thus exposes how private

family discourse and the small-scale intimacies of same-sex relations can produce misrecognition and tragic consequences for young women.

3.2 Popular Culture and Clothing

Since girlhood is a transitional, developmental condition, adolescent imitation of adult behavior and efforts to dissociate from childish traits constitute important manifestations of girlhood. Both Ferrante and Chang register this tendency through motifs of popular culture and dress. In the *Neapolitan Novels*, when Lila marries Stefano at sixteen, she discovers the performative power of appearance. She uses Stefano's resources to acquire fashionable clothing and accessories, models herself on film stars, and rides in a Fiat through the run-down neighborhood, becoming, in Lenù's perception, a localized emblem of glamour. In *The Lying Life of Adults*, Giovanna's all-black wardrobe likewise stages identity work through costume. In Chang's "The First Brazier", Mrs Liang's wardrobe and the narrator Weilong's immersion in role play similarly reveal how dressing up, mediated by mass culture and model figures, expresses an aesthetic inclination and a naïve yearning for adult identity [9]. Such performative enactments, however, also disclose a deficient grasp of what maturity entails and a partial, childlike conception of womanhood.

3.3 Rivalry and Intimacy Among Peers

Ferrante's fiction frequently depicts friendships between girls as sites of intense rivalry interlaced with mutual dependence. The love triangles that implicate Lenù, Lila and Nino, and the parallels in *The Lying Life of Adults* when Giovanna and Giulia vie for male attention, exemplify how romantic desire catalyzes competitive dynamics. The relationship between Lenù and Lila functions as both the structural axis of the quartet and the narrative engine. Their exchanges involve material support, concealment in moments of crisis, reciprocal borrowing of inspiration, and persistent efforts to outdo one another. Ferrante has described how the two protagonists energize and inhibit each other; Lenù spends much of her life attempting to escape Lila's influence, while Lila's aesthetic decisiveness and audacity repeatedly illuminate and unsettle Lenù's project of self-formation. In these accounts hostility and competition emerge from mutual recognition and the project of self-definition rather than from a simple betrayal of female solidarity. In *The Lying Life of Adults*, Giovanna's admiration for her cousin Giulia and Giulia's deliberate self-presentation produces a more superficial contrast shaped by insecurity and performative mimicry.

Chang's fiction likewise stages subtle rivalries among contemporaneous young women. The short story *Classmates Then All Successful Now* traces psychological shifts and the uneasy recalibration of status after reunion, as when Zhao Yu experiences Enjuan's barbed remarks and registers changes in their class positions and attitudes toward social distinction [10]. If Zhao Yu and Enjuan's interaction suggests a muted reproach accompanying the dissipation of youthful affection, then the tensions between Manlu and Manzhen in *Half a Lifelong Romance* represent an amplified, more extreme form of protest and estrangement within female peer relations [11].

4 Dissolution of Girlhood

The two authors depict the loss of girlhood in both explicit and implicit registers. Explicit transformations are manifested in changes of bodily appearance, speech, and conduct. In Chang's novella "Red Rose, White Rose," Zhenbao's reunion with Jiaorui foregrounds his ageing and diminished allure [9]; in *Half a Lifelong Romance*, Manlu's decline after her career as a dancer and Manzhen's experiences of sexual violence and confinement enact corporeal and social ruin [9]. Ferrante likewise stages stark physical and domestic violence against young women, as when Lila suffers spousal abuse during her honeymoon, a contrast that accentuates the brutal dissolution of youthful idealism.

Implicit losses operate at the levels of disillusionment with love, marriage, and ideological commitments. In "Red Rose, White Rose," when the seemingly devoted Zhenbao reveals his underlying cowardice, Jiaorui experiences a moment of abrupt awakening. As Chang describes: "*She raised her swollen face and looked at him steadily. In a flash she stood up straight, appearing surprised that she had let herself get into such a state. She found her handbag, took out a small mirror, and checked her reflection from both sides. She gave her hair a couple of quick brushes with her hand, wiped her eyes with a handkerchief, blew her nose, and then, without so much as a glance at him, she left* [9]." This sudden burst of clarity is similarly echoed in *The Lying Life of Adults*. From childhood, Giovanna idolizes Roberto as the ultimate embodiment of virtue and an object of worship. However, after Roberto begins a relationship with her cousin Juliana, Giovanna perceives the stark disparity in their social standing and Juliana's profound anxiety. When Giovanna finally orchestrates a private encounter with Roberto, her romanticized longing is shattered by a single, mundane suggestion. Subsequently, she cynically chooses her own sexual partner as a rite of passage into adulthood, which is a gesture that serves to thoroughly deconstruct the concept of "girlhood" within a state of cynical composure.

The urban settings of twentieth-century Shanghai and Hong Kong, shaped by commercial modernity and wartime upheaval, initially stimulate the sentimental awakenings of young women but ultimately facilitate their premature erasure under the exigencies of marriage and survival. A prime example is Weilong in "The First Brazier" after her marriage to George Qiao. Originally shielded by her pure, youthful sensibilities, she finds herself after marriage in a life of "*either getting money or getting people.*" On New Year's Eve, as she "*celebrated the new year with a childish delight,*" she is mistaken for a streetwalker by several soldiers. Subsequently, she weeps silently beside George Qiao, while the line "*The fireworks had all gone off, and the incense had finished burning*" highlights this "incomplete completion." Similarly, in *Love in a Fallen City*: "*Liu Yuan no longer joked with her now. He saved his clever remarks for other women. That was cause for celebration: it meant he now treated her as one of his own -- as a legitimate wife. Yet Liusu still felt a bit let down* [9]."

Sometimes these levels of loss intersect. In Chang's "The Golden Cangue," Qi Qiao is compelled into marriage with the disabled younger master of the Jiang family in order to secure family interests, and her adolescence survives only as retroactive traces within the narrative of loss [9]. After the separation she exchanges heated argument and a silent window-side farewell with Jiang Jize, gestures that register lingering attachment

and the disillusionment of erotic expectation. Thereafter Qi Qiao exists chiefly as an agent of familial cruelty until death, and in retrospection she enumerates youthful impressions -- "the young man who had once liked her," the memory of her once "round arms" -- intensifying elegiac regret for the lost girl. The textual evidence for Chang'an is more explicit. After encountering her mother's obstruction, Chang'an stages two emblematic "desolate yet beautiful" gestures that enact the surrender of nascent ideals and desires. The first occurs when she leaves school: she renounces friends who correspond with her, abandons progressive convictions, adopts morally compromised behaviors (including opium use), and assists in concealing the crime against her sister-in-law Zhishou. The second occurs in her entanglement with Tong Shifang, where maternal interference again forces a capitulation expressed as an aestheticized self-deception. In both instances Chang'an's ritualized gestures register a mature concession that sacrifices girlhood for social survival.

Ferrante's *Neapolitan Novels* repeatedly stages analogous losses of girlhood across emotional, marital, and political registers. Regarding love and marriage, the young Lila enjoys reading the *Aeneid*, believing that "*without love, not only does the life of people become sterile, but the life of cities is extinguished.*" Despite this, her precocity leads her to declare that she "*would never love anyone, she would never write poetry again.*" She chooses Stefano primarily to escape the marriage forced upon her by Marcello and her father. However, it is Nino's later appearance that makes her realize she "*finally knew what a real kiss was.*" However, her cohabitation with Nino lasts only twenty-three days before they part ways. Throughout her development, Lila remains acutely aware of the transformation of the men in her life, such as her brother Rino and her husband Stefano, as they shift from protectors to aggressors. Ferrante provides the most iconic portrayals and symbols of this realization, such as the conflict between Rino and the Solaras on the rooftop, which triggers Lila's profound sensation of "dissolving margins".

The definition of girlhood is not confined to traditional feminine melancholy; rather, it signifies the developmental trajectory of young women and encompasses all the necessary elements for the formation of an autonomous self. Furthermore, it remains distinct from both boyhood and childhood. Girlhood warrants independent scholarly investigation due to physiological and psychological differences, the systemic flaws inherent in patriarchal societies, and the subsequent distortions of female adolescent experiences. Consequently, the disillusionment of ideals serves as a crucial manifestation of the loss of girlhood. In the *Neapolitan Novels*, "The Story of the Shoes" functions as a section title, establishing the shoes as a vital symbol of Lila's intellect and ingenuity. After losing the opportunity to further her education, Lila channels her creativity into her father's shoemaking shop. Simultaneously, she maintains a keen awareness of local power dynamics. Possessing a fierce sense of justice, she vehemently opposes the Solaras family's brutal methods of primitive capital accumulation. However, Stefano secretly gifts Lila's first custom-designed shoes to Marcello Solaras, and Marcello subsequently wears them to Lila's wedding. This sequence of betrayals deals a devastating blow to Lila. In terms of political ideals, the "revolutionary friendship" between Lila and Pasquale concludes with his abrupt marriage proposal. Similarly, after navigating her marriage to Pietro and her cohabitation with Nino, Lenù reunites with her first love

from university, Franco. Franco had been severely beaten and permanently disabled due to his radical political views. Lenù later witnesses the tragic reality of his suicide by hanging, which is an event that inflicts immense psychological trauma upon her.

5 Conclusion and Discussion

This article undertakes a close comparative reading of how Ferrante and Chang represent girlhood. Although the two authors are separated by cultural geography, parallel readings of Ferrante's *Neapolitan Novels* and Chang's fiction (notably *Love in a Fallen City*) reveal convergent concerns. Both bodies of work engage contexts of historical turbulence. Specifically, this involves postwar social conflict and left-leaning politics in Ferrante, and the Sino-Japanese War and Republican-era upheavals in Chang. Furthermore, both stage trenchant critiques of heterosexual politics, in which young women's value is often measured against their success or failure in competition for male attention.

Despite these shared preoccupations, their narrative tones and literary trajectories diverge markedly. Ferrante consistently writes from an immersive interior perspective that traces the flow, conflict, and gradual self-formation of girlhood; her novels exhibit a Bildungsroman dynamic in which persistence through trauma and awakening produces a survivorly agency. By contrast, Chang frequently frames girlhood from the vantage of loss and elegy. Her young female figures often display constrained or regressive development and abrupt, sacrificial endings. Formally, Ferrante reorients modern Italian fiction toward peer women's networks; Chang, drawing on classical Chinese imagery while deploying urban sentimental modes, preserves a popular-legendary tonal register in twentieth-century Shanghai literature.

A deeper examination of the textual underpinnings of both authors reveals that their portrayals of intricate female emotions serve as metaphors for broader social structures. Within the ambiguous contexts of revolution or turbulence, the complex bonds between Lila and Lenù in Ferrante's work, as well as the relationships between Zhao Yu and Hao Surong in Chang's *Classmates Then All Successful Now* and between Chang'an and her mother in "The Golden Cangue," all reflect a shared anxiety of disenfranchisement. This is specifically a marginalized condition where women are relegated to being the "spiritual sanctuary" of a male-dominated world focused on social transformation. The intense intimacy of female friendship, which is often accompanied by negative and unstable elements of jealousy, essentially stems from a yearning for the narrative of the "other" who has successfully navigated the currents of real-world power. This phenomenon represents the displacement of macro-social contradictions into the private sphere. Such competition not only exposes the limitations of female growth but also manifests a noble pursuit of establishing an autonomous selfhood.

The comparison undertaken in this study extends beyond a comparative reading at the textual level, as it possesses significant disciplinary value within the field of comparative literature. In recent years, scholars have increasingly focused on cross-temporal exchanges between Italian and Chinese cultural works. Relevant research has explored the similarities in filmmaking under the social upheavals of Italian Neorealism,

the May Fourth movement, and Left-wing literature, which is an endeavor that has facilitated a long-overdue Sino-Italian dialogue. However, research in this area has previously seldom reached the level of literary texts. By approaching this subject from a literary perspective and selecting Ferrante and Chang, two authors who maintained a certain distance from the mainstream of the last century yet demonstrated a profound concern for life, this article fills a critical research gap. Furthermore, this study aligns with the current scholarly trend in Chinese comparative literature that emphasizes heterogeneity and advocates for cross-civilizational dialogue. Ferrante's texts possess a unique advantage in dissemination by bridging the traditional and the modern, thereby constructing a narrative system centered on female experience. Simultaneously, Chang's work occupies the intersection of Eastern and Western cultures, which is a position that grants her writing both enduring literary charm and extensive space for cross-cultural interpretation.

Finally, in the contexts of globalization and urbanization, Ferrante's and Chang's depictions of girlhood remain instructive for understanding the alienation of women's experience within mass culture and same-sex communities. Rather than advancing programmatic political manifestos, both authors render the interiority and constrained development of urban women in compact, affectively charged prose. Comparative work grounded in literary ontology and spanning cultural geographies thus supports a more plural and inclusive account of world literary practice and supplies concrete textual evidence for transnational interpretation.

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