

Analyses of love in a fallen city and the golden cangue

[Life](#), [Love](#)



For the bulk of the mid- to late-20th Century, Eileen Chang's name and literary prowess fell into obscurity as a result of events related to the Cultural Revolution and her own reclusion. In C. T. Hsia's *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction*, he praised Chang for her use of "rich imagery" and "profound exploration of human nature." In his book, he also claimed Chang to be "the best and most important writer" of mid-twentieth century China. Hsia's remarks and Ang Lee's film adaptation of her novella, *Lust, Caution*, have helped to bring Chang's name back onto the literary scene.

Two of her most well-known and highly praised novellas are *Love in a Fallen City* and *The Golden Cangue*. On the surface, the stories describe the details of family activities, love relationships, and marriages that occupy mundane life in places like Shanghai and Hong Kong, but beneath the simple plot lines, the stories personify the struggles of strong-willed women within the family arena during a tumultuous time of change in China. *Love in a Fallen City* is a love story between a divorcee, Bai Liusu, and a playboy businessman, Fan Liuyuan.

As a divorcee, Liusu is forced to return to her father's home where she is an unwelcome fixture and an added economic burden. In a turn of events, the man, Fan Liuyuan, who was supposed to be her niece's suitor, chooses her over the niece, exacerbating her situation at home. With nothing to lose, she follows Fan to Hong Kong where their love blossoms amidst the beginnings of the Japanese occupation of the city. *The Golden Cangue* follows the story of Cao Qiqiao, a widow who lives in anguish as a powerless daughter-in-law in a wealthy family.

She was forced into an arranged marriage with a sickly man and treated poorly by her husband's family. After the death of her husband, she gains independence and a small amount of wealth, but after years of torment, she turns her own repressed anger towards her children. The two stories share similar sentiments in that they depict the different struggles of women in the family setting. For Liusu, her struggle was to gain the acceptance of her family and love and affection from Liuyuan. In Qiqiao's case, her struggle was her search for an escape from her oppressive family life.

Eileen Chang's use of dialogue shows the strength of the women and her descriptions within the stories help to depict the inner turmoil each woman faces. The story of *Love in Fallen City* starts in the household of the Bai family. News concerning the death of Bai Liusu's ex-husband arrives from a family acquaintance. The news stirs up the issue of whether or not Liusu should return to her late ex-husband's home for mourning, as dictated by traditional family values. The possibility that her family would send her back to her in-laws infuriates her but she still remains composed.

While she is in the weaker position in terms of family hierarchy, she holds the power in dialogue because of her sharp tongue: Liusu had now reached the height of fury, but she simply laughed. " Yes, yes, everything is my fault. You're poor? It's because I've eaten you out of house and home. You've lost your capital? It must be that I've led you on. Your sons die? I've done it to you, I've ruined your fate. (Chang, 114) While obviously upset, she remains composed. Rather than allow her emotions to show physically, she translates those emotions into words.

Liusu's sharp retorts are common throughout the book and they show the strength of her character. She does not allow herself to become the victim and she responds with dagger-like words that show her anger and disappointment. The position Liusu finds herself in is a result of her family's lack of concern for her general wellbeing and happiness. As one of the younger female members of the family, she holds no power. Everything in her life happened because her family dictated her fate. She never had a choice in which direction she should take her life and she has become embittered because of her lack of independence.

When she meets Fan Liuyuan, she takes her chances and follows him to Hong Kong. Her decision to leave Shanghai has two implications. Firstly, she wants an escape from her family. After years of following their rules and hearing their complaints about her presence, she finally has a chance to leave it all behind to find her own independence. Secondly, she is strangely attracted to Liuyuan and securing his love and attention is a conquest for her. After leaving Shanghai, Liusu stays in a hotel in Hong Kong and spends more and more time with Liuyuan. The two of them develop a relationship but their intentions are different.

For Liusu, getting close to Liuyuan was a way for her to leave the Bai family. Liuyuan, on the other hand is seeking spiritual love. He professes his love for her on many occasions, but she rejects him each time. Her goal in being in a relationship with Liuyuan is to have security and Liuyuan's words hold no meaning to her, but instead are examples of his playboy behavior: Liusu was silent for a while, but finally she burst out: " Why not go ahead and just say,

flat out, that you don't want to marry me, and leave it at that! Why beat around the bush, with all this talk of not being able to decide things?

Even a conservative person like me can say, ' First marriage for the family, second marriage for oneself. ' If someone as free and unburdened as you are can't decide for himself, then who can decide for you? " (Chang, 149) In her scolding of Liuyuan, Liusu states her views of marriage which are defined by her real life experiences. Her first marriage was an arranged marriage that was to the benefit of her family, but for her second marriage she wants it to be for herself. She is seeking stability in her life and she does not think Liuyuan is apt to fill that void.

As much as she is attracted to him, she cannot see past his playboy charm. Her defenses and words show how she is strong-willed and determined to make right what went wrong in her life. Throughout the novel, Fan Liuyuan expresses his love to Liusu. He claims she is a " real Chinese woman" and continues on to say, " Real Chinese women are the world's most beautiful women. They're never out of fashion. " (Chang, 135) Liuyuan loves Liusu and thinks of her as the ideal Chinese woman, yet he worries that she is part of the trap of Chinese culture that wants him only for a convenient marriage.

Therefore, he tries to take her away from China to Hong Kong the colony; he even considers taking her to Malaysia and Africa, to primitive lands. By attempting to remove her from her native home, he is essentially taking away her power over him. He wants to force her into the spiritual love that he wants, undermining her position as a strong woman. In the end, the

marriage does go through, but only because the war forced the two of them together. The two people both have selfish tendencies and neither could have been together in any other situation: Hong Kong's defeat had brought Liusu victory. But in this unreasonable world, who can distinguish cause from effect? Who knows which is which? Did a great city fall so that she could be vindicated? Countless thousands of people dead, countless thousands of people suffering, after that an earthshaking revolution... Liusu didn't feel there was anything subtle about her place in history. She stood up, smiling, and kicked the pan of mosquito-repellent incense under the table. Those legendary beauties who felled cities and kingdoms were probably all like that. (Chang, 167)

Because of all that she had to go through, she likens herself to other strong women in history who brought down cities and kingdoms. She secured her place in the world by overcoming all the obstacles that were presented to her. She managed to leave her oppressive family and find a second husband who will accept her as she is. Achieving her goals at the end validates her as a strong Chinese woman. The Golden Cangue presents a different story about a woman and her struggles with her family. Similar to Liusu, Cao Qiqiao is stuck in an unhappy family situation.

As a daughter from a poor family, she was married off to the son of a wealthy family. In her husband's family, she suffers from ridicule and repression. As time progresses, she slowly loses her mind because of all that she has had to endure within the family. When she finally gains some independence, she completely loses all sanity and takes out her pent up

anger on her daughter and daughter-in-law. Qiqiao, in many respects, is a strong woman. She had to put up with constant ridicule from her husband's family and she had no independence. Her resilience is characterized in her attitude and actions towards her family.

As a daughter-in-law, she suffered at the hands of her husband's family, once she becomes a mother-in-law she perpetuates this cycle of torment and directs her bitterness towards her own children and daughter-in-law. In one instance, she believes her daughter's feet need to be bound in order to attract suitors: As she looked at them [her feet], something occurred to her and she said with a cynical laugh, " You may say yes but how do I know if you're sensible or silly at heart? You're this big already, and with a pair of big feet, where can't you go?

Even if I could control you, I wouldn't have the energy to watch you all day long. Actually at thirteen it's already too late for foot binding, it is my fault not to have seen to it earlier. We'll start right now, there's still time. "

(Chang, 208) Qiqiao has reached a point where she lacks reasoning. All of her thoughts are convoluted and in her mind she has convinced herself that torturing her own children will be for their benefit. She is lost in her own misery because of the restraints placed on her by her husband's family. She understands that her daughter has much more freedom than she did when she was younger.

The actual decision to bind her daughter's feet seemingly comes as a result of jealousy. Since she had to suffer, so should her children. What makes

Qiqiao a strong woman is her lucid insanity. She calculates and plots every action to her own benefits and pleasure. She understands that money and power run the world, and she does what she can within her means to feel superior over others. So the golden cangue is a symbol of power and money. She wears the golden cangue as a burden on her conscience and she used it to get whatever she needed: For thirty years now she had worn a golden cangue.

She had used its heavy edges to chop down several people; those that did not die were half killed. She knew that her son and daughter hated her to the death, that the relatives on her husband's side hated her, and that her own kinsfolk also hated her. (Chang 243) The golden cangue tainted her moral being and she had become a much hated person. She was driven by power and money but in the end, her actions and effort were all for naught. She loses power over her children and she is left to die in her misery. Both characters, Liusu and Qiqiao, were products of their respective environments.

The difference in the two women comes in how they take hold of their future. For Liusu, she knew she wanted an escape from her family and she took the reins of her life and got what she want with Liuyuan. Qiqiao on the other hand, attempted to get control of her life, but instead she got caught in the madness of being an opium addict. One woman was able to break free from the social constraints placed on her while the other was not. Qiqiao perpetuates the vicious cycle of family tradition that damaged her in the first place.

So while she is strong in the sense that she is calculating and conniving, she fails to break the cycle that caused her misery and she is no better than other petty men. The two stories both capture the essence of Eileen Chang's works. Through her writing, she was able give voice to the thoughts of women. She shows a great range in her depiction of women, from the weak to strong, cruel matriarchs. The works give insight into the condition of women during the early 20th century but on a larger scale they also reveal the way in which women are affected by their family life.