

# The Influence of Time Background on the Film and Television Adaptation of Literary Works -- Take Love of Falling City by Zhang Ailing as An Example

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## Abstract:

The article takes *Love in a Fallen City* as an example and discusses the influence of the era background on the adaptation of film and television works by analyzing two representative versions. The research significance of this paper is aimed at further studying film and television works for an adaptation of the original with the connection of the historical background and probe into the possibilities of cinematography of literary works in the future. The research found that the version of cinema and the version of the teleplay *Love in a Fallen City* the film adaptation was influenced by the background of the time, including the ideological wave of the society at that time, economic conditions and technological development and other aspects. Therefore, the two versions have made many adaptations compared with the original in terms of characterization, scene setting and narrative length. In the future, when adapting classic literature, film and television works should respect the original works, extract the core of the original works and integrate it into the creation of works, combine the background of the time, guide and improve the audience's aesthetic appreciation, and create truly valuable and meaningful works.

**Keywords:** Zhang Ailing; Love in the Falling City; Film and television adaptation; Interdisciplinary research

## 1. Introduction

Zhang Ailing is a writer with unique personal charm in the history of modern and contemporary Chinese literature. There is no absolute distinction between good and evil, right and wrong in her characters. She

stood from a higher perspective and deeply analyzed the inner depths of each character. Her book *Love in a Fallen City* has also received widespread attention. Fu Lei commented on *Love in a Fallen City*: "Because it is a legend, it doesn't have the seriousness, nobility, and fatalism of tragedy, and the expression of desire

is not thrilling. The flirting that occupies nearly half of the space is filled with cynical hedonistic mental games, like the parallel prose of the Six Dynasties. Although it is adorned with jewels, it is empty and hollow inside, there is neither true joy nor deep-seated sorrow. [1]" So the complexity and uniqueness of this novel are evident.

Therefore, this work has also been adapted into a film and television series multiple times. The two versions that have sparked the most discussion among people are the 1984 film version directed by Ann Hui and starring actors such as Miao Qianren and Chow Yun fat. The other is a TV drama version directed by Meng Ji and starring Chen Shu, Huang Jue, and others, which was released in 2009. The adaptation of the two versions also caused considerable controversy at that time, and different people had different interpretations of this work [2]. The author will start with the different eras in which the two versions were adapted, and analyze the influence of the historical background on the film adaptation of the two versions of *Love in a Fallen City*.

Existing research often discusses *Love in a Fallen City* separately from its film and television adaptations, or compares it with the original work to analyze the shortcomings of the film adaptation compared to the original work, which is that they do not convey the female ideology that Zhang Ailing wanted to express. The TV series version added many unnecessary plots and deviated from the original work. The author will place these two works in an equal position and compare and analyze whether the significant differences in adaptation between the two works are related to the social background at that time. The research significance of this article aims to further investigate the connection between the adaptation of original works by film and television works and the historical background, as well as explore more possibilities for the film and television adaptation of future literary works.

## 2. The Differences Between the Film and Television Adaptations of the Two Versions of *Love in the Falling City*

When analyzing the film version of *Love in the Falling City*, this study chooses the female perspective as the starting point; Many plots and lines in the film are restored to the original, but there is a certain degree of lack of female perspective. In the analysis of the TV version of *Love in the Falling City*, the author will take the trend of the public as the starting point, and analyze that the TV series adds a lot of plots and beautifies the characters, which is very line with the popular aesthetic trend at that time.

### 2.1 A Female Perspective Analysis of the Film Version of *Love in the Falling City*

Eileen Chang's *Love in a Falling City* is set in old Shanghai in the thirties and forties of the twentieth century. With the influx of various Western currents into China, feminism has also begun to awaken. Zhang Ailing also devotes a lot of space in the book to why Bai Liusu changed his thinking under the limitations of the times. The Bai family was originally big, but Bai Liusu's father was addicted to gambling and lost all his family property. Even so, Bai Liusu did not want to be attached to her husband, but chose to divorce and return with a large sum of money to the Bai family. But after her brothers squandered all the money, they put pressure on her through the three cardinal guides and the five constant virtues and Natural Law to drive her away.

Because of what the Bai family did to her, coupled with the constraints on women in that era, Bai Liusu was completely cold, and at this moment, Bai Liusu's mentality changed. As Wan Quan wrote in his article, "Bai Liusu in *Love in a Falling City*", although she was born and raised in an old-fashioned family, she chose to leave after she couldn't stand her husband, and at this time, she already has the independent consciousness of a new-style woman. But even such a revolutionary woman still can't get rid of the shackles of traditional ideas"[3].

However, in the movie, it is an understatement of what happened before Bai Liusu met Fan Liuyuan, weakening Bai Liusu's sense of independence and personality change, and spending a lot of shots to describe the love story of Bai Liusu and Fan Liuyuan. In the original book, there is a line: "She decided to bet on her future. If she wins the bet, she can get Fan Liuyuan, the target of everyone's eyes, and completely express this evil breath in her heart [4]." This sentence can be seen that Bai Liusu is eager to take the initiative to pursue the happiness he wants. However, in the movie, the Bai Liusu is more often forced to accept the arrangement of fate. This makes the female perspective in the movie lose the independent thinking and exploration of women in the original book to a certain extent.

Another major feature of Zhang Ailing's works is the "sense of desolation". She concludes the book by saying, "Yanagihara never jokes with her now. He saved his quips and shared them with the woman next to him. That was a good sign to be thankful for, and it meant that he completely treated her as his own family—a wife who was rightfully named. However, LiuSu was still a little melancholy. [4]" This shows that although Bai Liusu tried hard to marry Fan Liuyuan, it was still unsatisfactory after all. But the movie came to an abrupt end after they got mar-

ried, giving them a relatively happy ending. In addition, the description of war in the original book is also relatively simple and obscure. Zhang Ailing focuses more on describing the changes in the mentality of Bai Liusu and Fan Liuyuan caused by the war, which is a game of human nature and a contest of emotions. However, in the movie, the war is depicted through several “big scenes”, and the relationship between the two is handled more simply and directly. The plots of Fan Liuyuan and Bai Liusu getting along and supporting each other in the war were magnified, and the changes in their feelings became more rapid and intense under the catalysis of the war.

## 2.2 The Popular Trend of the TV Adaptation of Love in a Fallen City

In the novel, Fan Liuyuan says, “If you had known me before, perhaps you would forgive me now. [4]” Zhang Ailing provides a relatively concise and vague overview of the pasts of Fan Liuyuan and Bai Liusu, but the television series extensively expands upon their pasts, incorporating much of the director’s own imagination. For instance, Bai Liusu’s forced marriage to the wealthy but dissolute Tang Yiyuan due to her family’s decline and the ridicule she endured in her own family evoke sympathy from viewers towards this character.

The characters portrayed by Zhang Ailing are extremely complex. In the original novel, Bai Liusu has her own calculations and intentions. Her feelings for Fan Liuyuan are not simple love but rather more like seeing him as a life-saver to escape her predicament. Zhang Ailing does not praise or celebrate their love in the book; rather, it is more like satire: a satire on the oppression and constraints faced by women in that era. Marriages achieved through calculations and testing, even if they end up together, are filled with a sense of desolation, reflecting the helplessness and compromise of people towards love and marriage against the social backdrop of the time.

However, the television series has beautified the characters to a certain extent, making Bai Liusu’s image more gentle, magnanimous, and appropriate. She uses her wisdom to resolve a farce at the wedding banquet, enhancing the prestige of her family; in the face of Tang Yiyuan’s infidelity, she demonstrates great tolerance; she even visits her aunt-in-law, who had tormented her in the Tang family, and bails Tang Yiyuan, whom she has divorced, out of jail. It is these beautifications of the character that weaken Zhang Ailing’s exploration of humanity and the plight of women in the social context of the time, aligning more with the aesthetic ideals of the masses. “Compared to the original novel, the television series has more warmth and

less rational criticism. Catering to mass aesthetic tastes overshadows the female perspective and stance with progressive significance for the times, resulting in the flattening of the novel’s thematic depth, the deep revelation of humanity, and the issue of women’s survival in that era. What viewers see is just an ordinary and common love story. The television series lacks deep reflection on women’s tragic fate and rarely reflects the sense of life in Zhang Ailing’s novels. [5]”

## 3. The Cinematographic Adaptation of Love in a Fallen City and Its Connection to the Historical Background

### 3.1 Cinematographic Adaptation in the 1980s

In the 1980s, amidst the upheaval of China’s reform and opening-up policy, Cao Zhong mentioned in his article that the adaptation of mainland Chinese literature into films consistently highlighted a distinct elite cultural consciousness. Not only did elite groups replace revolutionary heroes and workers, peasants, and soldiers as the main focus on the screen, but the revival of humanity within the elite cultural context also made adaptations of love and youth themes popular, thereby calling for the return of human liberation and the spirit of freedom [6]. Consequently, people’s ideologies transformed, and there were more discussions about women’s status and perceptions. Women began to pursue greater independence and autonomy, and many women’s views on marriage and love were vastly different from before. Bai Liusu, depicted in most scenes of the film, was on the passive side. The weakening of her character and independent consciousness reflected the complex mindset of society towards the rapid development of women’s status and the rise of women’s independent thinking at that time. People had just experienced rapid modernization and might have been somewhat uneasy with the image of women being overly independent and calculating. Therefore, Bai Liusu in the film was portrayed more as a gentle and fragile figure, which aligned with the expectations of some people towards women at that time. Focusing on the love between the two main characters as the centerpiece of the entire film also corresponded to the elite groups and the general public’s call for humanity and emotional connection after the reform and opening-up in 1978 [6]. Meanwhile, with the opening of society and the liberation of thought, people were no longer as implicit and obscure in expressing their emotions as in the past, preferring instead to directly convey their feelings to each other. The straightforward expression of emotions in the film was also related to the

historical background. Hence, the emotional communication between Fan Liuyuan and Bai Liusu in the film was more direct, catering to the emotional needs of the audience at that time.

Moreover, during the period when the film version of *Love in a Fallen City* was shot, Hong Kong was undergoing rapid economic development, with a relatively stable and open social atmosphere. People had more aspirations and expectations for love and life, which contributed to the disappearance of the “desolate feeling” in the film’s ending. Under the historical background of that time, people were more eager to see inspiring film and television works. Therefore, the psychological descriptions and explorations of humanity between Fan Liuyuan and Bai Liusu during wartime in the original novel were weakened, and the war mainly served as a plot device. The two supported and relied on each other, showcasing the beauty and resilience of humanity through their love story, bringing some emotion and comfort to the audience. In the 1980s, China’s film industry was also booming, with films continuously exploring and innovating in terms of expression. The film depicted war scenes in greater detail, including specific portrayals of bombing, smoke, ruins, and other images, enhancing the visual impact and tension of the war scenes to meet the aesthetic demands of the audience at that time.

### 3.2 Film and Television Adaptations in the 21st Century

The 21st century is a commercialized era where all commercial activities (naturally including film and television dramas) aim at profitability. People have undergone significant social transformations such as advancements in information technology and digitization, accelerated urbanization, and noticeable improvements in material life. Consequently, they began to pursue spiritual fulfillment, seeking warmth and comfort therein. “Literary production stipulates literary consumption, and literary consumption also constrains literary production.” For film and television dramas to be profitable, they must cater to the public’s aesthetics. As an important communication medium, television dramas need to display positive values, effectively disseminate positive energy, and have a broad audience. Therefore, the screenwriter of the TV drama *Love in a Fallen City* reset the characters’ personalities based on plot changes, making Bai Liusu and Fan Liuyuan’s images more positive: In the original novel, their images are relatively complex, with both attractive aspects and some criticizable behaviors. However, in TV dramas, their images are more positive, making it easier for viewers to sympathize with and understand them [7]. For instance,

many details of the war are depicted in the drama. When war comes, they work together to help the injured. Bai Liusu uses some simple nursing knowledge she learned to dress wounds for the injured, while Fan Liuyuan assists in carrying the injured and transferring them to relatively safe places. They also support each other with their neighbors, share limited food and water, give the food they find to hungry neighbors, help the elderly and children obtain clean drinking water, and other details that reflect the warmth and kindness in their humanity.

## 4. The Social Impact of Different Versions of *Love in a Fallen City* Against the Background of Their Times

### 4.1 The Impact of the Film Version of *Love in a Fallen City*

In the 1980s, film culture was gradually rising, and the filming techniques and technologies of locally produced films attracted a large audience to cinemas, enabling the story of *Love in a Fallen City* to spread more widely and expanding its social influence. The closing caption of the film, “It was the war that fulfilled her,” sparked widespread discussion at that time. Some film reviews mentioned that the theme of the film was not to promote great love but rather to highlight women who needed a war to fulfill themselves under the then-social system. Without that war, could women retain their love [8]? This also reflects people’s analysis and discussion of the film at that time. The plot in the book is restored through scenes and props, making it more immersive for those who have read the original novel. The artistic elements of the film, such as visuals, music, and performances, provide a unique aesthetic experience for viewers. The presentation of Shanghai and Hong Kong’s urban landscapes, characters’ clothing, social scenes, etc., in the film showcases the unique charm of that era. In an era where information and transportation were not as developed, people were full of unknowns about the lifestyles of other regions. The artistic treatment of the novel enhanced viewers’ aesthetic level. Meanwhile, the outstanding performances of the actors in the film also allowed viewers to more deeply understand the characters’ personalities and emotions in the novel, enhancing the artistic appeal of the work.

### 4.2 The Impact of the TV Drama Version of *Love in a Fallen City*

Against the background of the gradual popularization of television at that time, film and television dramas became an important part of people’s daily entertainment lives,

bringing them spiritual enjoyment and relaxation. During the adaptation process, the TV drama version made certain adaptations and expansions to the characters and plots in the novel, sparking comparisons and discussions among viewers between the original novel and the TV drama adaptation. The TV drama had a significant impact at that time. As the plot deepened during broadcasting, the audience ratings of *Love in a Fallen City* continued to rise, from an initial 1% to nearly 3% at the end. These data confirm the audience's acceptance and affection for the drama. The drama was also premiered by Taiwan's Era TV, setting a record for the highest audience rating since the channel's inception and causing a huge response in the mainland, Hong Kong, and Taiwan [9]. People can also gain healing and strength from many scenes in the film and television drama. In Yang Rui's view, no matter how times change, humans' need for deep emotional comfort remains constant. Classic literature and its film and television adaptations are the source of this comfort. "They are like ballast stones of the times, providing people with a stable spiritual foundation [10]." In addition, the drama sparked intense discussions at that time, which not only involved issues of artistic creation but also discussions on values such as love, marriage, and family. While watching the TV drama, viewers would reflect on these values based on their understanding and feelings, thereby promoting the diversified development of social values and attracting many young people in the 21st century to learn about *Love in a Fallen City* and Zhang Ailing's works.

## 5. Conclusion

In summary, this paper has conducted an in-depth analysis of the cinematic and televisual adaptations of *Love in a Fallen City*, both in film and television series formats, and their influences shaped by the historical context of the time, encompassing ideological trends, economic conditions, technological advancements, and other facets of society. It has discussed the adaptations made in character portrayal, scene settings, and narrative lengths compared to the original work in both versions. Both versions of *Love in a Fallen City* have disseminated and expanded the influence of the original work to varying degrees. Zhang Ailing provides profound insights and analyses into the

environment in which women found themselves and the issues they faced in society at that time. The film version of *Love in a Fallen City* largely restores the original work, including dialogues and character images. Still, it lacks in-depth treatment of the difficulties faced by women at that time. While the television series version significantly expands the character images, enriching them, it lacks exploration and discussion of humanity. Future film and television adaptations of classic literature should respect the original work, extract its core elements, and integrate them into the creation of the work. At the same time, they should take into account the historical context of the time, guide and elevate the aesthetic appreciation of the audience, and create truly valuable and meaningful works.

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