

# The Spatial Writing of Traditional and Modern Civilization in *Love in a Fallen City* by Eileen Chang

Linyi Li

School of Chinese Language and Literature, Nanjing Normal University, Nanjing, 210023, China  
Email: 01210324@njnu.edu.cn

## Abstract:

This paper explores the urban space depicted in Eileen Chang's novella *Love in a Fallen City*, delving into the interplay between traditional and modern civilizations. Through close textual analysis and literary research methods, it examines the psychological landscapes of the main characters. Furthermore, it analyzes how Eileen Chang portrays the relationship between traditional and modern spaces in her works and how this portrayal influences the characters' behavior and fate. While existing academic research on Eileen Chang's works and ideas has been abundant and deeply insightful, there are relatively lacking cases to analyze her novels from the perspective of spatial writing. To deepen the understanding of Eileen Chang's works and her creative style and provide a new perspective for the interpretation of her other works, this research conducts an in-depth discussion on the spatial writing depicting traditional and modern civilizations in her work, *Love in a Fallen City*.

**Keywords:** *Love in a Fallen City*; traditional civilization; modern civilization; spatial writing.

## 1. Introduction

In the Chinese literary world of the 20th century, Eileen Chang won wide praise for her unique literary style and profound social insight. Her novella *Love in a Fallen City* allows readers to explore the interweaving of tradition and modernity [1]. In the 20th century, the conflict and fusion of traditional and modern spaces became the focus of literature, sociology, and philosophy. In *Love in a Fallen City*, Eileen Chang vividly depicts the interwoven urban space of tradition and modernity. This paper deeply explores the interplay between tradition and modern spaces and its influence on characters' behavior and fate within this historical background.

To fully understand the works of Eileen Chang, particularly *Love in a Fallen City*, it is imperative to analyze the author's life, writing style, and the context in which her works were created. Therefore, this research adopts the methods of literature analysis and close-text reading. Drawing from the original text of *Love in a Fallen City* and relevant research materials and referencing existing scholarship, this study conducts in-depth research on Eileen Chang's life and works. On this basis, the paper explores the nuanced depiction of traditional and modern spaces within *Love in a Fallen City* and the symbolic meaning carried by these narratives. By exploring the socio-historical background surrounding the creation of this

work, the aim is to present readers with a more abundant and profound understanding of Eileen Chang's literary world.

## 2. The Research Status of *Love in a Fallen City*

Written in 1943, *Love in a Fallen City* depicts urban men and women's complex psychology and fate through the romantic entanglements of Bai Liusu and Fan Liuyuan. It portrays the coexistence of traditional and modern spaces by depicting scenes and character relationships in both Shanghai and Hong Kong. Against the backdrop of a war-torn era marked by chaos and hardship, *Love in a Fallen City* explores individuals' lived experiences and choices in the interweaving of tradition and modernity.

There are relatively few research cases that combine *Love in a Fallen City* with spatial writing. Wang Huikai interprets Eileen Chang's feminine spirit by dividing space and time into physical and psychological dimensions [2]. In her novels, Gao Shengyu analyzed the reasons for the formation, specific forms of expression, and cultural value of Eileen Chang's spatial writing. He clarified the research object and explained the overall research value, grasping Eileen Chang's spatial writing from a holistic perspective [3].

Studies on the expression of urban civilization in Eileen Chang's works are relatively abundant. Among them, Li

Xia conducted a case study on modern urban civilization in Eileen Chang's eyes, using *Love in a Fallen City* as an example [4]. Starting from the tradition and modernity in Eileen Chang's eyes, the author analyzes Eileen Chang's stance towards modern urban civilization and comments on her modern narrative. On the one hand, this approach reflects Eileen Chang's views on traditional civilization and modern urban civilizations. On the other hand, it also reveals her complex and contradictory attitudes towards enlightenment and modern discourse [4]. However, Ruan Lanfang conducted a specific analysis placing Eileen Chang within the broader context of urban literature [5]. This paper focuses on *Love in a Fallen City* as the research object to analyze the expression of urban space and characters' psychological dimensions in Eileen Chang's novels.

### 3. The Spatial Writing of Traditional and Modern Civilization in *Love in a Fallen City*

The „space“ of the text refers to the description, shaping, and symbolic portrayal of various dimensions. It is not limited to physical or psychological realms. Eileen Chang was born into an aristocratic family. She grew up in the modern culture of Shanghai and Hong Kong, so her academic foundation naturally showed the characteristics of blending Chinese and Western. Moreover, benefiting from the rich cultural exchange between Shanghai and Hong Kong, Chang's academic background prominently reflects cross-disciplinary art forms, such as painting, film, fashion, cuisine, etc. The diverse cultural and artistic experiences interwoven into her life profoundly influenced the spatial writing in her novels [6].

The traditional buildings, such as the old blocks and quadrangle courtyards frequently mentioned in the novel, serve as the background of the characters' activities and as important settings where the plot unfolds. These traditional spaces are endowed with profound cultural connotations in Eileen Chang's works, serving as repositories of historical memory and cultural carriers. In the novel, traditional spaces are mainly embodied in the concepts of family, traditional culture, and female destiny.

The White family's residence, where the Bai Liusu resides, represents the traditional concept under the feudal family system, where the honor and interests of the family constrain individual freedom. Bai Liusu faces great pressure and difficulties from her family and society. As a daughter of the Bai family and a divorced woman, her fate is closely linked to her familial ties, and the expectations and pressures imposed by her family become an inextricable burden in her life. The novel begins with Mrs.

Xu reporting the funeral, which then leads to the divorce experience of Bai Liusu. Under the oppression of her brother and sister-in-law, Bai Liusu seeks solace from her mother, only to be met with indifference, as her mother's response in Bai Liusu's ears was, „blindly avoiding the serious, I felt bored, I had to say nothing“ [1]. At this time, Bai Liusu grapples with conflicting emotions. While she recognizes the Bai family as her only refuge after divorce, she contends with the persecution from her brother and his wife and her mother's indifference, prompting her to escape from the family. Thus, when Mrs. Xu comforts Bai Liusu, she finds solace in hearing „these fair words, and do not ask her whether she is sincere or false, first from the heart heat up“ [1].

The modern entertainment venues in the urban landscape serve as modern space elements, which sharply contrast traditional settings, showcasing the prosperity and hustle of the modern city. By depicting these modern spaces, Eileen Chang illustrates people's pursuit of material life and their desire for modernization. Hong Kong, as one of the main settings in the novel, is depicted as a city full of exotic and modern atmosphere. Bai Liusu embodies the pursuit of self-worth in matters of love and marriage. After experiencing the war, she reflects, „In this turbulent world, money, real estate, everything is unreliable.“ She could only count on the tone of her voice and the man sleeping next to her [1]. Survival becomes the most important issue for all people in troubled times, and the peace and prosperity of the „island“ can vanish at any time. This is the psychological space of the characters within modern civilization and the expression of the city spirit.

### 4. Physical Space, Mental Space, and Cultural Metaphor

The traditional space of the Bai Mansion stands in sharp contrast to the modern urban landscape of Hong Kong. The dark and crowded Bai Mansion represents the old family system and strict feudal ethics. At the same time, the modern and avant-garde atmosphere of Hong Kong symbolizes emerging modern cultural norms and values. Bai Liusu, considering herself „a woman who has passed the time,“ transitions from the rhythmic pace of life at the Bai Mansion to the Repulse Bay Hotel in Hong Kong. Meanwhile, Fan Liuyuan intends to find a „real“ and „authentic“ Chinese woman. In *Love in a Fallen City*, Eileen Chang makes the traditional and modern spaces interweave with each other through the activities of the characters and the development of the plot, forming a complex and diversified literary space. This kind of spatial writing not only enriches the narrative level of the novel but also allows readers to experience the tension and conflict be-

tween tradition and modernity throughout the reading process.

Shanghai and Hong Kong are two vast physical spaces, and the transition from Bai Mansion to Repulse Bay Hotel is the microscopic space of individual survival. Bai Liusu's heart also undergoes subtle changes: from depression and despair in Bai Mansion to an open and bright heart in Repulse Bay. As a result, Fan Liuyuan has become the last straw that Bai Liusu can grasp and her desperate bet [7]. The transfer of physical space changes the characters' psychological activities. Exploring the complex psychological world of the characters through the lens of space enables readers to interpret the characters more holistically and better grasp the underlying theme of the works. Chen Sihe believes that Eileen Chang's interest in the process of Bai and Fan's love extends beyond mere outcomes; she carefully designs many tactics for their love, exaggerating their precision and selfishness, but she cannot conceal the presence of genuine affection. Their hearts are imbued with love; otherwise, such efforts would be unnecessary [8]. Such complex and contradictory emotions are displayed in the relying space. Bai Liusu experiences four spatial changes between Shanghai and Hong Kong, each showing her unique psychological trajectory. In *Love in a Fallen City*, Eileen Chang presents the coexistence of traditional and modern spaces through her depictions of Bai Mansion and the new home in Hong Kong, as well as the complex relationships and fates of the characters. For example, in a scene depicting a phone dispute between Fan Liuyuan and Bai Liusu, the characters come to a mutual realization that their feelings for each other are not genuine. During the call, Fan Liuyuan describes that the moon on his side is always incomplete because rattan flowers or roses block it, while Bai Liusu's tears blur her vision of the moon, making it appear large and indistinct. The second mention of the moon came when Fan Liuyuan sneaked into Bai Liusu's room because the moon in her room was more clearly visible, like frostflowers on the window. Eileen Chang employs the moon as a metaphor, creating a bleak and vague atmosphere through the cold moonlight [7]. The images in the space carry cultural meaning and metaphor, reflecting the cultural conflicts and human experiences in urban modernization. The culmination of the narrative sees Bai Liusu finding fulfillment with the fall of Hong Kong, leading to their marriage. This marks the narrative's conclusion, with Hong Kong as a pivotal geographical setting.

However, what did she accomplish? The fall of the city of Hong Kong was temporary, and after the armistice returned to Shanghai, the days of tassels were still long. This empty city years and the „hall of eternal life“ type of love are very different, showing the distance between

novels and legends [9]. In My Essay, Eileen Chang said, „Many works have more power than beauty. Force is happy, and beauty is sad; the two cannot exist independently. ‚Life and death contract is wide, with you, holding your hand, and we grow old together‘ is a sad poem, but its attitude towards life is positive. I don't like grandeur. I like solemn, more like lonely [10]. „When the traffic between Hong Kong and Shanghai resumed, they came back to Shanghai“ [1]; for Bai Liusu, Shanghai and Hong Kong are stretched, she finally found a stable space to put the body, and Eileen Chang also completed a “space legend” from Shanghai to Hong Kong [11].

## 5. Conclusion

This paper analyzes the cultural metaphors of some images in *Love in a Fallen City* from the aspects of physical and psychological space. The novel's traditional and modern space of desolation reflects Eileen Chang's exploration of the tragic consciousness of modern life and her observation and reflection on individual life experiences. To sum up, the space depicted in literary works serves as a backdrop to the narrative and a vehicle for conveying profound significance. Eileen Chang's spatial writing closely relates to traditional and modern civilization, including Shanghai and Hong Kong, Bai Mansion, and Repulse Bay Hotel. Eileen Chang also had the experience of interrupting her studies and making a living independently. This life situation will likely be projected intentionally or not in *Love in a Fallen City*. Shanghai and Hong Kong emerged as the most prominent urban spaces depicted by Chang, wherein she explores both the expansive nature of these modern metropolises and the sense of oppression experienced by their inhabitants.

In *Love in a Fallen City*, the spatial writing of traditional and modern civilization has become a unique narrative technique. Through an in-depth analysis of the spatial description in the novel, the following conclusion can be drawn: in *Love in a Fallen City*, the spaces representing traditional and modern civilization do not exist in isolation but interweave and influence each other. This integration is evident not only in specific geographical settings but also in the psychological and social spaces inhabited by the characters. The spatial description in the novel is closely related to the fate of the characters. Traditional spaces are often associated with the characters' repression, restraint, and helplessness, while modern spaces provide them with the possibility of pursuing freedom and realizing themselves. Eileen Chang skillfully uses spatial writing in her novels, which makes them rich in symbolic meaning.

The study offers fresh insights into her works, enriching

our understanding of her literary prowess. It reveals the complex relationship between social change, human nature, and character fate. Based on these findings, further research on spatial writing in other works of Eileen Chang can be carried out to explore how she uses spatial writing to express thematic ideas in different works. Further investigations can also explore the relationship between spatial writing and social and cultural contexts, revealing varying authorial choices within different cultural backgrounds.

### References

- [1] Eileen Chang. *Love in a Fallen City*. Beijing: Beijing October Literature and Art Publishing House, 2012: 163, 165, 199
- [2] Wang Huikai. The Concept of Time and Space and Female Spirit in Eileen Chang's Works. *Appreciation of Masterpieces*, 2012, (08): 44-46.
- [3] Gao Shengyu. Spatial Writing and Its Cultural Value in Eileen Chang's Novels. Liaoning Normal University, 2020.
- [4] Li Xia. On Modern Urban Civilization in Eileen Chang's Eyes: Taking *Love in the Fallen City* as an example. *Lanzhou Journal*, 2011 (06): 172-175+185.
- [5] Ruan Lanfang. *Daily Life and Literature Shanghai*. Shandong University, 2014.
- [6] Li Xiang. *A Study on Spatial Writing in Eileen Chang's Novels*. Liaoning University, 2023.
- [7] Ding Rui. On Spatial Consciousness in Eileen Chang's novels: A Case Study of *Love in a Fallen City*. *Masterpieces Appreciation*, 2019, (20): 44-45.
- [8] Chen Sihe. The Folk World of the City: The *Love in a Fallen City*. *Journal of Hangzhou Teachers College (Social Science Edition)*, 2004, (04): 20-32.
- [9] Ai Xiaoming. Counter-legend: Re-reading Eileen Chang's *Love in a Fallen City*. *Academic Research*, 1996(09): 81-86.
- [10] Jin Hongda, Yu Qing, Ed. *The Complete Collection of Eileen Chang*. 1996: 790
- [11] Han Ming Gang. Spatial Awareness and Unique Charm of Eileen Chang's Novels from *Love in a Fallen City*. *Journal of Chongqing Jiaotong University (Social Science Edition)*, 2016, 16 (06): 89-92.