

Analyzing the awakening of female consciousness in *Love in a Fallen City*—Framed in the social context of Shanghai during the May Fourth period

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Abstract:

Shanghai has always been a city of legends. In the mid-twentieth century, the establishment of the Concession in Shanghai led to the city's active or passive acceptance of the impacts and changes brought by foreign cultures in its social life and ideological and cultural aspects. Against this background, a group of pioneering women began to abandon the constraints imposed on women by feudal ethics, and women's self-awareness and sense of independence began to awaken. This paper takes Shanghai in the May 4th period as the social background framework, and takes Zhang Eileen's middle grade novel *Love in a Fallen City* as an example, and adopts the research method of textual analysis to focus on the specific content of the text in order to analyse and explore the trend of women's awakening of their consciousness under the impact of traditional Chinese feudalism in the May 4th period.

Keywords: Awakening of Female Consciousness; *Love in a Fallen City*; Shanghai

1 INTRODUCTION

In the history of China's development, the May Fourth period was a period of ideological emancipation and exchange. Under the influence of the ideology of individuality liberation in the May Fourth period, a variety of 'new' ideas emerged, and works reflecting the awakening of women's consciousness from a feminist perspective were also emerging. There were also numerous works reflecting the awakening of women's consciousness from the perspective of feminism. *Love in a Fallen City* is a

middle-grade novel written by Eileen Chang in 1943 in Shanghai from a feminist perspective, reflecting her deep concern for women. 'Shanghai during the May Fourth Period was a time of prosperity and legend, as well as a time when old and new cultures converged and mingled. Influenced by new foreign cultures and the ideology of individuality liberation, a group of 'new' women with the first awakening of women's consciousness appeared in Shanghai during the May Fourth period. The female figure of Bai Liusu, portrayed by Zhang Eileen's in *Love in a Fallen City* is a representative of the 'new' women of

this period. Born into an old feudal family baptised by the old culture, Bai Liusu experienced a failed marriage, and the brave Bai Liusu chose to end it and finally returned to her mother's house. After being subjected to cynicism in her mother's house, she sees through the world and finally understands that she is very different in her thinking from the other women in her family. Later, she meets Fan Liuyuan, who regards love as a game, but their souls are not compatible after all. Bai Liusu is looking for economic dependence, while Fan Liuyuan wants emotional resonance and does not want to be responsible for his feelings, so a game of love between reality and spirit, male and female, is launched. In the end, when the Pacific War broke out, both of them compromised on their own, making this game marriage have a happy ending full of sadness. The ultimate research goal of this study is to use Shanghai during the May Fourth period as the background framework to explain the intrinsic connection between the cultural background of Shanghai at that time and the awakening of women's consciousness, and to explore the awakening of women's consciousness in *Love in a Fallen City* with an overlooking perspective.

2 Perspectives on the female image of *Love in a Fallen City* in the context of Shanghai culture

Shanghai in the 1920s and 1930s had become an international metropolis, synonymous with prosperity and modernity. Western countries set up rent boundaries in Shanghai, and 'in the context of the special rent space, Shanghai either actively or passively accepted Western culture and modern lifestyle' (Du and Huang, 2024). At this time, Shanghai was in a period of convergence and fusion between Western culture and local Chinese culture. The people of Shanghai in this cultural context were divided into two groups: the old school, which adhered to the traditional Chinese feudal culture and ideology, and the new school, which accepted the foreign ideas of the West as well as the trend of the May 4th ideological and cultural movement.

Bai Liusu's family is a typical feudal family in traditional Chinese society. Most of the women in this large family are paralysed by the requirements and restrictions imposed on women by the feudal society. When Bai Liusu returns to her mother's house after her divorce, her family treats her with indifference, dislike and exploitation. 'As soon as she married into her in-laws' family, her husband became a loser, and when she came back to her mother's house, she saw that her family was going to be ruined - a born broomstar (Zhang, 2019). Her brothers and sisters-

in-law thought that she was a 'broomstar' and that her return to her mother's house would spoil the family's luck, and her mother adopted a cold attitude towards her, even saying to her such cold and heartless words as, 'It's better to be dead, so that you don't have to divorce' (Zhang, 2019). Her brothers also did not give Bai Liusu sympathy, but rather sneered at her, believing that she was eating and drinking in the Bai family, and that Bai Liusu was mentally oppressed and tortured in her mother's house.

This shows that the women of the Bai family are still clinging to the traditional feudal ideology, and are still bound by the ancient 'Three Obediences and Four Virtues' and the ethical norms of women, and are still in a state of numbness, still maintaining the male-dominated discourse of the ancient Chinese society, and believing that women are the subordinates of men, and should be in the service of men. Women were ideologically subordinate to a male-dominated society and a highly centralised system of power, and had long been in a dominant position. In Shanghai at that time, a group of 'old-fashioned' women stuck to the ancient feudal traditions, and there was no sign of women's awakening in terms of self-awareness and gender consciousness.

During the historical process from the May Fourth Movement to the 1940s, women's social status was indeed upgraded by leaps and bounds (Qiu and Liu, 2010). During this period, Shanghai set up a rented area, and under the influence of the culture of the rented area, some of the pioneering women were influenced by Western culture, and began to come into contact with Western-style education, and their thinking was more advanced. They are no longer blindly observing the constraints of the 'Three Obediences and Four Virtues' put forward by the ancient Chinese society for women, as well as the shackles and constraints of the ancient society, which believed that women as wives should be attached to men in the society with the images of 'gentleness' and 'virtuousness'. 'Gentle' and 'virtuous' as wives, as well as the ancient belief that women should be attached to men as 'gentle' and 'virtuous'. They began to develop a sense of gender and self-consciousness, and began to focus on themselves. Bai Liusu is a representative of a group of women with advanced ideas in Shanghai during this period.

In ancient China, men dominated with absolute power in all societies, from the smallest to the largest feudal families. In terms of the marriage system, China has long had the custom that marriages must be concluded by 'the order of parents' and 'the word of a matchmaker'. In particular, the male's direct line of honourable relatives have the absolute right to officiate at marriages and are not to be disobeyed by their children (Li, 2005). Women have no initiative and no right to choose between love and mar-

riage, and can only be forced to accept and obey, which to a large extent restricts women's thinking and makes them more and more numb, and they will only obey the male-dominated society, becoming subordinate to men and having a very low social status. Bai Liusu in *Love in a Fallen City* has to obey society and her father by accepting the arranged marriage system of the ancient Chinese feudal family and marrying Tang Yiyuan. Tang Yiyuan is a tycoon with a low social status, but is rich, and the Bai family is not rich but was once a Hanlin family. In this seemingly perfect marriage, the essence is actually a transaction named 'marriage'. The sweet life after marriage didn't last long, but Tang Yiyuan revealed himself as a playboy, having an affair with other women. Bai Liusu couldn't stand her husband's betrayal and eventually chose to divorce him.

Bai Liusu's decision was not understood by society at that time, but it was very courageous and a role model for women in society at that time and even now. In the face of an unhappy marriage, Bai Liusu dares to take the initiative to end the failed marriage relationship, and this decision shows that in Bai Liusu, female consciousness is in the state of sprouting and initial awakening. In order to understand the causes of the awakening of Baillieu's consciousness, it is necessary to return to the context of macro-social change. In addition to the influence of the introduction of Western culture after the establishment of the Concession, whereby society gradually began to accept the concepts of 'individual freedom' and 'autonomy in marriage,' the influence of the transformation of local Chinese culture was also felt. In addition to the influence of the introduction of Western culture after the establishment of the Concession, society gradually began to accept the concepts of 'individual freedom' and 'autonomy of marriage', but also due to the influence of China's local cultural transformation. In ancient China, under the domination of the concept of 'great unity', the vertical power system of the state formed a highly centralised model of centralised power structure, and the centralised power structure of the state was the most powerful one in the world (Wang, 2012). In ancient China, there was a great distance between the rights of the society, and the whole society needed to be subordinate to the Son of Heaven, and every family needed to be subordinate to the father or the husband. Under the structure of this model, the marriage system in ancient China showed the basic characteristics of 'the right to marry belongs to parents, the purpose of marriage is procreation, and the norm of marriage is that the man is the master and the woman is the subordinate' (Chen, 2021). Individuals do not yet have a sense of independence and the right to make their own choices, not to mention the freedom of marriage and marital autonomy.

Women have historically existed in subordinate and dependent roles relative to men. In the face of male infidelity within marriage, they were often powerless to resist. Their lack of economic independence made it difficult, if not impossible, for them to support themselves. Moreover, they frequently had to endure societal scorn and abuse directed at women, leaving them with little choice but to work hard and shoulder the responsibility of raising their families alone. Women could only work hard at home, bear their grievances and raise their children. In the May Fourth period, under the influence of the ideology of individuality and liberation, the power distance in Chinese society showed a tendency to narrow, and a large number of intellectuals gradually awakened to their sense of individual independence, and began to desperately want to escape from and break through the bondage of the feudal autocratic system and the feudal extended family system, which was first and foremost embodied in the institution of marriage. Marriage, as a 'disaster area' of feudalism and a major conflict point in society and the family (Song, 2019). During this period, the tone of promoting marriage autonomy and criticising traditional marriage was present. People's understanding of 'freedom of marriage' and 'marriage autonomy' became more profound, and instead of just obeying the arranged marriages arranged by the big feudal families, people bravely pursued their own happiness and took the right of marriage autonomy into their own hands. Instead, they bravely pursue their own happiness and take the autonomy of marriage into their own hands. During this period, women began to gradually shift their attention to themselves, focusing more on themselves and their own feelings. At the same time, women in this period were not only the single object of aesthetics, but also the main body of aesthetics, unprecedentedly reversing the situation of ancient Chinese society with men as the main body of aesthetics, and grasping the initiative of aesthetics. From the point of view of both external and internal influences, women's awareness of gender and independence in this period was bound to awaken, and the awakening of women's consciousness was an inevitable trend.

3 The awakening of women's consciousness in *Love in a Fallen City*

3.1 Ending marriage

Although Bai Liusu comes from a large traditional Chinese feudal family, she is not completely bound and paralysed by the traditional feudal thinking, and she is not bound by the traditional concept of 'three obediences

and four virtues', and she goes with the flow and believes that women's way of being in a society where men have absolute say is to be attached to men. In the face of her husband's unfaithfulness in the marriage, Bai Liusu finally and bravely chooses to end the failed marriage. On the one hand, it can be seen that in this marital relationship, Bai Liusu does not place herself in the framework of traditional marriage, believing that women should have a lower status than men and be in a dominated position. Rather, she puts herself in the position of the subject in this marital relationship, and shifts her sights to her own feelings as the main focus. For her husband's betrayal and unfaithfulness in marriage, Bai Liusu did not choose to hold back like the majority of women in the society at that time, forcing herself to forgive her husband's unfaithfulness by paralysing herself with the 'gentleness' and 'virtuosity' that the traditional society of ancient China demanded of women and sticking to the concept of 'the man is in charge of the outside world, the woman is in charge of the inside world'. Behaviour, and adhere to the traditional feudal concept of gender division of labour, 'the man is the master of the outside world, the woman is the master of the inside world', that 'raising children with their husbands', and taking care of the family is the duty of women, but chose to bear the scrutiny of the society at that time, she is also strong to defend their dignity. Instead, she chose to defend her dignity even under the scrutiny of society at the time, and ended the marriage decisively, not letting herself be compromised. Bai Liusu's decision is not only an escape from the failed marriage, but also an escape and rebellion against the traditional marriage system and the ethical norms of ancient China. On the other hand, Bai Liusu already has an independent character and bravely snatches women's right to speak in the marriage relationship. It is her strong and stoic character that makes the awareness of female awakening hidden in her begin to shine (Li,2013). To a certain extent, it also embodies the initial awakening of women's subjective consciousness, gender consciousness as well as female consciousness.

3.2 Divorce and return to the mother's home

After Bai Liusu divorce and return to her mother's house, the attitude of the women in her mother's house towards Bai Liusu contrasts and contrasts with Bai Liusu's decision to bravely choose divorce without worldly constraints. When Bai Liusu returns to her mother's home, the family is full of indifference, ridicule, and dislike towards her. Her sister-in-law makes mean accusations against her, believing that she has been fed by her mother's family and wants to keep relying on them. Although her mother had some sympathy for Bai Liusu, in the end, she chose to

compromise and be indifferent, even saying, 'It's better to go back to your ex-husband's house and adopt a child to live with than to suffer at home (Zhang, 2019).' Such cold words. From the attitude of the women of the mother's family towards Bai Liusu after the divorce, it can be seen that these women of the Bai family still numbly abide by the traditional feudal ethics and concept of marriage, and at the same time, it also reflects that the traditional concept of marriage and ethical norms in the society at that time on the women's bondage and ideological confinement, persecution, and there is no awakening of women's consciousness in them. In the face of her family's cynicism, Bai Liusu made a strong counterattack against this kind of hypocritical affection built on money. She said to her third brother, 'According to you, were all those legal tactics fooling around in the first place?' In response to her mother's indifference and cowardice, Bai Liusu used, 'You should have said so long ago, why didn't you say so seven or eight years ago?' to expose the nature of the intimacy of the big feudal families in the society at that time. Bai Liusu's resistance to the cynicism of her mother's family is also, to a certain extent, a reflection of the fact that women's consciousness is beginning to show an awakening trend, rather than choosing to be tolerant and submissive.

3.3 Acquaintance with Fan Liu Yuan

Bai Liusu and Fan Liuyuan's acquaintance is in a mischievous ball, which is supposed to be a blind date between Baoluo and Fan Liuyuan, but because of a few dances, Bai Liusu gets Fan Liuyuan's adoration and love. Bai Liusu's distinctive dance moves Fan Liuyuan, who thinks, 'Miss Bao Luo is so mute, but Miss Bai Liu is quite interesting.' Bai Liusu did not feel inferior because she was divorced, nor was she influenced by the traditional Chinese feudal concept that 'women should stay at home to raise their children and should not show their faces', but she boldly and calmly showed her beautiful dance to the crowd, and in the end, she even gained the love of Fan Liuyuan, proving to her mother's family that she was not as useless as they said. She proves to her mother's family that she is not as useless as they say. Bai Liusu boldly and calmly show their own skills to the crowd, through the gaze of the self to show their unique femininity, which is not only the recognition and affirmation of their own, but also have the feudal traditional concepts and the feudal extended family system of rebellion, from a certain point of view, the women have begun to shift their attention to themselves, pay more attention to the feelings of the self, and dare to show and show their own, the awakening of women's consciousness (Li, 2024). The sprouting of women's

consciousness is beginning to appear.

3.4 Travelling to Hong Kong with Fan Liuyuan

In order to escape from her mother's family, Bai Liusu makes a highly groundbreaking move in society at the time, choosing to travel to Hong Kong with Fan Liuyuan. Influenced by western culture and thought since childhood, Fan Liu Yuan longs for a love that has great spiritual resonance and is a flirtatious love, hoping that his other half can understand, know and understand him, and pursuing a spiritual match. But in the face of reality, Fan Liuhuan beautifully said that they do not want to use the marriage relationship to bind love, the essence is that Fan Liuhuan only want to enjoy the love in the spirit of their own satisfaction and pleasure, but do not want to assume the corresponding responsibility. Fan Liu Yuan said 'I am not so confused, I do not need to spend the money to marry a person who has no feelings for me to control me' (Zhang, 2019). In the eyes of Fan Liu Yuan, marriage is not the end of love, marriage is just a constraint on their own constraints and shackles, love is more biased towards emotion, but marriage is more important responsibility. In the face of Fan Liuyuan's temptation, Bai Liusu also reveals the bottom line, she does not want to become a 'mistress' but only wants a marriage title. In this relationship, both people have their own demands, which makes this love affair inevitably full of games. Bai Liusu did not choose to remain nameless and unattributed, but simply committed to the side of Fan Liubuan, but wanted to fight for a rightful name for himself, with his remaining youth to bet on the marriage, trying to take the initiative of marriage, Bai Liusu realised that 'in this turbulent world, money, property, and everything that is long-lasting is unreliable.' In love and marriage, men are not eternal dependence, only a strong and courageous self is (Wu, 2022). From this, it can see that Bai Liusu already has an independent character, no longer rely on everything around her, the independence of women's consciousness has been initially awakened. When faced with Fan Liuyuan's mockery of 'marriage as long-term prostitution', Bai Liusu also retaliated: 'What do you think marriage is? Is it a meal ticket for women to sell their bodies? I think it's a way for men to buy peace of mind with money!' It can be seen that Bai Liusu completely rejected the prevailing social concept that in marriage, women were subordinate and dependent on men and could not exist and stand on their own in society, and took the initiative to fight for women's right to take the initiative in marriage, and women's consciousness began to show a gradual awakening trend. Taking the Pacific War as an opportunity, this marriage, which was full of games, has a seemingly happy ending.

Bai Liusu chose to take the initiative to negotiate the idea of marriage, and the relationship was eventually brought to an end in the name of marriage, and Bai Liusu also realised her change of status from 'lover' to 'wife' as she wished. In this love affair, although Bai Liusu has an independent character and a sense of gender independence, her resistance to male power is not complete, and she still relies on marriage. However, Bai Liusu takes the initiative to fight for the right to speak and take the initiative in marriage, giving up the fantasy of romantic love, not wanting to be a male subordinate without a name, recognising the reality, and wanting to rely on herself to survive and stand firm in the male-dominated society at that time, which, to a certain extent, embodies the awakening of the consciousness of women and the rational survival wisdom of women.

4 CONCLUSION

The findings of this study are that women's consciousness had initially awakened during the May Fourth period. The May 4th period was a special and highly significant period in the history of China's development, a time when old and new cultures collided and merged. Shanghai during this period witnessed the convergence of foreign cultures as well as exchanges and collisions with traditional Chinese culture. Influenced by the culture of the Shanghai Concession and the thinking of the New Culture Movement, the awakening of women's independence and female consciousness became an inevitable trend, and women began to pay attention to themselves and aspired to realise their self-worth. This study explores the Chinese novel *Love in a Fallen City* and analyses in detail the typical female figure of Bai Liusu, who reflects the trend of the beginning of the awakening of women's consciousness in the May Fourth period. In the future, it can continue to take typical cities in China as examples, and combine the social background and historical and cultural characteristics of typical cities to study the germination, transformation and awakening of women's consciousness in other literary works of the May 4th period from multiple perspectives and in greater depth.

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