



Courtesy of Eileen Chang estate

BIOGRAPHY

Eileen Chang (1920–1995) was the daughter of Old China and Modern China, with an aristocratic, deeply traditional father and a sophisticated, cosmopolitan, Western-educated mother. She became a literary celebrity in Shanghai during the 1940s, but moved to Hong Kong in 1952 for political reasons, then immigrated to the United States three years later. Two novels, both commissioned in the 1950s by the U.S. Information Service as anti-Communist propaganda, *The Rice Sprout Song* and *Naked Earth*, were followed by a third in 1967, *The Rouge of the North*, which expands her early novella, “The Golden Cangue.” *Love in a Fallen City* is the first collection of her stories to appear in English.

The “Garbo of Chinese letters,” Chang became ever more reclusive as she grew older, and was found dead in her Los Angeles apartment in September 1995. But a tremendous revival of interest in her work had already begun in Taiwan and Hong Kong in the 1970s and spread to mainland China, where she is now one of the most celebrated writers of the century. *The Map of Eileen Chang*, about the places in Shanghai where Chang stayed or even just had a cup of coffee, was an instant best-seller in 2003, and director Ang Lee (*Brokeback Mountain*, *The Ice Storm*) has decided that his first Chinese-language movie since *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* will be a spy thriller based on another of Chang’s stories, called *Lust, Caution*.

LOVE IN A FALLEN CITY

by Eileen Chang

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“Eileen Chang is the fallen angel of Chinese literature, and now, with these excellent new translations, English readers can discover why she is so revered by Chinese readers everywhere.” —Ang Lee

ABOUT THIS BOOK

Love in a Fallen City is the first collection of stories in English by Eileen Chang, one of modern China’s most admired and beloved writers. Chang’s stories are about men and women, especially women, who have no choice but to navigate the treacherous passage from the world of traditional China to the freedoms, ambitions, and dangers of modern life.

In “Aloeswood Incense,” a poor student asks for help from her rich, unmarried aunt; she gets money and status and beautiful clothes but in return is expected to lure attractive men into her aunt’s clutches. As the two women’s longings, requited and unrequited, shift among the different men in their circle, they each face complicated decisions about what they want and what they are willing to give in order to get it.

In “Love in a Fallen City,” the main character is a young widow feverishly calculating her chances for security, and maybe even love. “The Golden Cangue” is the story of a woman who marries up in the world, but is mistreated by her sickly husband and his rich relatives; she passes along to her daughter and daughter-in-law the yoke of contempt and suffering that her in-laws imposed upon her. “Red Rose, White Rose” tells the story of an ambitious, conservative man who sees every woman in his life as either a passionate mistress (red rose) or a spotless wife (white rose). As is so often the case with Chang’s characters, his simple model of the world soon proves inadequate to the complexities of real life, and his whole world is threatened with destruction.

Chang’s voice is unsentimental, worldly-wise, and yet deeply tender toward her characters, no matter their longings or dreams. Her insights into love and marriage and social status are as probing and subtle as Jane Austen’s, while her writing resonates with the themes and imagery of traditional Chinese poetry and prose. This combination makes Chang an intensely relevant writer today in our own fast-changing, ever more internationalized world.

FOR DISCUSSION

Aloeswood Incense

1. At the beginning of “Aloeswood Incense,” Chang describes a “basically Western” house “with some unexceptionable Chinese bric-a-brac”; she says it gives a picture of “China the way Westerners imagine it: exquisite, illogical, very entertaining” [p. 8]. Is this a fair description of Chang’s stories as well? What adjectives would you apply to the book as a whole?
2. Who is using whom? Do you feel sorry for either of them, or do they get what they deserve? Do you sympathize with one character more than the other? What about with the men in the story?
3. Midway through the story, Weilong pities Madame Liang for being so dependent on her lover, while Madame Liang pities Weilong for being so happy about a little affection [p. 46]. Are their situations truly symmetrical? A few pages later, they are given a pair of matching diamond bracelets, like “the handcuffs [that a detective] claps onto a criminal” [p. 50]. Do the women match too? How are they alike or not alike? What holds them prisoner?

OTHER NYRB CLASSICS OF INTEREST

Peking Story, David Kidd
(introduction by John Lanchester)

The Singapore Grip, J. G. Farrell
(introduction by Derek Mahon)

Rene Leys, Victor Segalen
(introduction by Ian Buruma)

The Pilgrim Hawk, Glenway Wescott
(introduction by Michael Cunningham)

Paris Stories, Mavis Gallant
(introduction by Michael Ondaatje)

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*

Ingeborg Bachmann, *Three Paths to the Lake*

Mary Gordon, *The Rest of Life*

Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*

Amy Tan, *The Joy Luck Club*

4. Near the end of the story, Weilong says “Fair? There’s no such thing as ‘fair’ in relationships between people” [p. 75]. Do you agree? Do you think that this realization is a victory or a defeat for Weilong?

Jasmine Tea

1. In real life, Eileen Chang had an opium-addicted and brutally violent father. Does knowing this change the way you read the story “Jasmine Tea”?

2. Were you surprised by the story’s shocking ending? If you imagine a different ending, what would it be?

Love in a Fallen City

1. Early in the story, someone tells the main character, Liusu, that “the law is one thing today and another tomorrow. What I’m talking about is the law of family relations, and that never changes!” [p. 113]. Do the events of the story prove him right or wrong? Do you agree with him? What are the laws of family relations?

2. Liusu is always “assessing” her situation in a calculating, almost cynical way [p. 141]. Does that make you sympathize with her more or less? Do her difficult circumstances warrant it or is she overreacting?

3. At the very end of the story Liusu says “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?... She stood up, smiling” [p. 167]. What do you think of this claim: too extreme, or true?

The Golden Cangue

1. In the translator’s introduction, Karen Kingsbury mentions that “The Golden Cangue” was translated by Chang herself, but that Kingsbury takes a different approach in the other stories, explaining or filling in many of the subtle, unspoken implications of Chang’s writing. Which approach do you like better? Do you like having to figure out the family relationships and what lies beneath what the characters say in “The Golden Cangue”—as the characters themselves must do—or do you prefer Kingsbury’s approach?

2. Were you surprised at how Ch’i-ch’iao inflicts her troubles on the younger generation [pp. 211 and 213]? Did it make you think differently about the first half of the story, where she seems to be the victim? When she inherits property, she thinks that she has worn the golden cangue for years and “it would be different from now on” [p. 194]. Do her thoughts about the cangue at the end confirm or deny this dream [p. 234]?

Sealed Off

1. The stuck tram in “Sealed Off” lets Chang give us a snapshot of all sorts of characters’ social positions and inner lives. Were you more struck by the similarities between all these strangers on a tram, or by the differences between them?

Red Rose, White Rose

1. “Red Rose, White Rose” opens by describing the split in Zhenbao’s view of women, but by the end of the story he himself seems split in two: “He couldn’t smash up the home he’d made, or his wife, or his daughter, but he could smash himself up....Again he was filled with tender sorrow for himself, a lover’s sorrow, but at the same time a strong-willed self stood opposite the lover, pulling and pushing and fighting with her” [p. 255; pp. 310–311]. How do these two splits relate to each other? Did you see signs, earlier in the story, of the problems his view of women was causing in himself?

2. “In China, as elsewhere, the constraints imposed by the traditional moral code were originally constructed for the benefit of women: they made beautiful women even harder to obtain, so their value rose, and ugly women were spared the prospect of never-ending humiliation. Women nowadays don’t have this kind of protective buffer” [p. 286]. Do you agree with this argument? Is it equally true “elsewhere,” for instance in the U.S.? Does Chang’s comment here make you rethink her other stories, where the traditional code seems to harm women?