

## THE DISTINCTIVE FEATURES OF EILEEN CHANG'S WORKS

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**Annotation.** This article examines the literary works of Eileen Chang, focusing on the uniqueness of her artistic style, the originality of her characters, and the thematic depth of her writings. Using a qualitative literary analysis approach, the study applies close reading alongside feminist and psychological perspectives to selected works such as *Love in a Fallen City* and *The Golden Cangue*. The research highlights Chang's ability to portray complex human emotions and urban life through refined narrative techniques and rich imagery. It also explores her contribution to modern Chinese literature, particularly in comparison with Lu Xun. The findings demonstrate that her works combine aesthetic sophistication with deep insight into human nature, securing her place as one of the most significant writers of the 20th century.

**Keywords:** Eileen Chang; modern Chinese literature; literary style; characterization; human nature; urban life; thematic analysis; close reading; feminist criticism; psychological analysis.

**Introduction:** Numerous critics have highly praised the artistic techniques of Eileen Chang (1920–1995). Anyone who has read her works is captivated by their striking and unique style. The distinctiveness of the “Eileen Chang style” makes her stand out in the history of modern Chinese literature and marks her unique contribution to the development of Chinese fiction. Wu Fuhui praised her delicate portrayal of the fate of old families in metropolitan settings, believing that the urban world she depicts most closely reflects the true face of Shanghai and elevates Chinese urban literature to the level of a “philosophy of the modern metropolis.” Yang Yi described her as possessing the genuine artistic temperament of a “talented scholar combined with a drifter,” calling her one of the most accomplished writers of the Shanghai School. Yan Jiayan believed she achieved a level that writers of the New Sensation School aspired to but never fully reached.

In Wang Yichuan's 1994 ranking of the top ten literary masters, Lu Xun and Eileen Chang were included without controversy, while the inclusion of Jin Yong and the exclusion of Guo Moruo and Mao Dun sparked debate. In 1999, *Asia Weekly* ranked the “Top 100 Chinese Novels of the 20th Century” as follows: 1. Lu Xun's *Call to Arms*, 2. Shen Congwen's *Border Town*, 3. Lao She's *Rickshaw Boy*, 4. Eileen Chang's *Legends*, 5. Qian Zhongshu's *Fortress Besieged*.

From October 24 to 26, 2000, the “International Symposium on Eileen Chang and Modern Chinese Literature” was held at Lingnan University in Hong Kong. When asked to name the greatest Chinese writers of the 20th century, Xia Zhiqing and Liu Zaifu both chose Lu Xun and Eileen Chang. Many scholarly works compare the two. Wang Derwei summarized the development of 20th-century Chinese culture as “from *Call to Arms* to *Gossip*,” referencing Lu Xun and Eileen Chang. It has even been said: “Since the May Fourth Movement, among Chinese writers with a limited number of works who have maintained enduring reader support, only Lu Xun and Eileen Chang qualify.”

Wang Furen once called Eileen Chang “the female Lu Xun,” noting that although their political attitudes differ, their literary tendencies and creative methods share more similarities than differences. While the study of Lu Xun has long been known as “Lu Xun Studies,” scholars in Taiwan and Hong Kong have begun to advocate for “Chang Studies.”

Although the two writers had no personal interaction and differ significantly in generation, themes, and style, they have increasingly been discussed together in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, as literary historiography has shifted toward pluralistic perspectives. The shift from a single grand thematic focus to a broader exploration of everyday life, from purely didactic literature to an emphasis on aesthetic and entertainment value, and from a singular leftist literary history to a pluralistic one—all of these changes have enabled Lu Xun and Eileen Chang to be discussed side by side. After an era of “struggle literature,” contemporary readers began to appreciate more relaxed and intimate narratives. This transition—from enlightenment literature to aesthetic literature, from the “warrior” to the “petty bourgeois”—illustrates a fascinating literary-historical phenomenon.

Eileen Chang held deep respect for Lu Xun. In 1971, while working at UC Berkeley, she remarked that Lu Xun excelled at exposing the darker aspects of Chinese character. She lamented that this tradition was abruptly interrupted after his death, as later writers tended to emphasize national pride while avoiding criticism of societal flaws. In this sense, Chang inherited Lu Xun’s concern with transforming national character and probing human nature. If Lu Xun may be described as a rebellious son of the gentry, then Eileen Chang is a talented wanderer of a chaotic cosmopolitan world. If Lu Xun embodies humanitarian concern, Chang conveys a sense of liberal individualism. If Lu Xun is a democratic fighter, Chang is a solitary individualist. Lu Xun’s sympathy lies with the masses; Chang’s focus is more on individual men and women.

Lu Xun’s style is characterized by key elements such as “writing for life,” “highlighting the essence,” “plain narration,” and “subtle expression,” all aimed at enlightenment and emphasizing social and human depth. In contrast, Chang’s style features “conflict,” “contrast,” and “anti-climax,” placing greater emphasis on aesthetic value and psychological depth. The two are both contrasting and complementary: Lu Xun represents the peak of enlightenment literature, while Eileen Chang represents the height of aesthetic literature in China. Eileen Chang possessed a strong sense of artistic independence. She was one of the few modern writers who created purely for the sake of creation, enabling her to avoid external interference and focus entirely on her artistic world. She also had a keen awareness of literary form, experimenting with various styles—from the Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies School to traditional chapter-based novels—eventually forming her distinctive and widely appealing style.

Moreover, she demonstrated exceptional ability in integrating Chinese classical literary traditions with modern Western techniques. Her works reveal profound insight into human nature, achieving a depth and aesthetic richness that surpasses many of her contemporaries. In the late 1950s, Xia Zhiqing formally incorporated Eileen Chang into literary history in his *History of Modern Chinese Fiction*, praising her historical consciousness, imagination, and psychological insight. In the United States, she has been placed alongside figures such as Li Bai, Du Fu, and Wu Cheng’en as a must-read author.

**The purpose of the research.** Study of the uniqueness of Eileen Chang's works, the originality of her characters, and the thematic content of her writings.

**Research methodology.** This study adopts a qualitative literary analysis approach to examine the works of Eileen Chang. The primary data consist of selected short stories and novellas, including *Love in a Fallen City* and *The Golden Cangue*, while secondary sources include scholarly articles and literary criticism. The research employs close reading as the main method, focusing on narrative techniques, characterization, and thematic expression. In addition, elements of feminist and psychological criticism are applied to analyze the complexity and uniqueness of Chang's characters.

The study specifically investigates three aspects: the distinctive stylistic features of Eileen Chang's writing, the individuality and non-repetitive nature of her characters, and the thematic depth of her works, particularly in relation to human nature, urban life, and interpersonal relationships. The analysis is conducted through detailed textual examination, comparison of characters across different works, and interpretation of recurring themes within their cultural and historical context.

**Results.** The British novelist Arnold Bennett once wrote that a classic is established when a few perceptive critics firmly recognize a work's value, and over time, public consensus follows. In this sense, figures like Fu Lei and Xia Zhiqing were such "brave and perceptive pioneers" in recognizing Chang's genius. Ultimately, the author insists that Eileen Chang was one of the most accomplished writers of the 1940s, one of the greatest Chinese novelists of the 20th century, and one of the most outstanding female writers in Chinese literary history. Her status as a "classic" writer continues to solidify over time.

The year 2020, marking the 100th anniversary of her birth, was dubbed the "Year of Eileen Chang." Various adaptations and works inspired by her—such as stage plays, television dramas, films, and audiobooks—were released. Despite ongoing debates about her legacy, her literary status continues to grow through critical discussion and reevaluation. Up to the present day, we ought to acknowledge that since the birth of New Literature during the May Fourth Movement, among contemporary novelists who depict urban life and human emotions, very few have been able—like her—to achieve such distinction in the literary world through perfectly mature technique, profound skill, a deep outlook on life, sharp observation, and rich imagination, that is, through a blazing and overflowing talent. In that pioneering and turbulent era, many writers' literary language was still influenced by the vernacular poetic style created by Hu Shi and Guo Moruo during the May Fourth period, which emphasized direct emotional expression and often held a dismissive attitude toward artistic technique. Works as refined, fluent, and deeply cultivated as hers were rare. It can be said that, standing somewhat apart from the main current of literary development, she revealed to us other dimensions of literature. These may be regarded as the most essential characteristics of her works, and they were already recognized by critics in the 1940s.

In terms of expression, her keen grasp of imagery, precise descriptions, and the use of metaphor and synesthesia to depict emotions and objects—thereby advancing the plot and enhancing the psychological portrayal of characters—constitute the most outstanding features of her work. Within these lie her meticulous observation of life, rich imagination, and her experience and overall command in handling the background and character construction of her works. These qualities are especially evident in her

novellas and short stories. For example, in a passage from “*Aloeswood Incense: The Second Brazier*”:

“...Spring within the walls spread and burned beyond them; all over the hills, wild azaleas bloomed in a roaring blaze, their scorching red sweeping down the slopes with irresistible force. Beyond the azaleas lay the deep blue sea, upon which white ships were moored.” Here, it is not merely the striking contrast of colors that gives the viewer a dizzying sense of unreality—everything is contrast. Various discordant elements—background, historical atmosphere—are forcibly blended together, creating a fantastical realm. This is not objective description; rather, subjective consciousness and imagination are interwoven to reflect the theme and characters, using the environment to mirror and intensify psychological states. It conveys the protagonist’s blurred awareness and fear when confronted with sudden shock. Completely integrated into the work, it not only serves as a form of emotional enhancement but also functions as a transition in the narrative (this passage describes a scene while the protagonist is on the road), providing hints and foreshadowing.

As an early work by the author, “*Aloeswood Incense: The Second Brazier*” clearly places heavy emphasis on the capture of imagery, atmospheric rendering, and narrative suggestion. At times, it feels somewhat excessive and bears visible traces of craftsmanship. Yet, on the other hand, it demonstrates the author’s extraordinary ability in this regard.

**Conclusion.** The works of Eileen Chang occupy a unique and enduring position in the history of modern Chinese literature. Through her distinctive artistic style, profound psychological insight, and innovative narrative techniques, she successfully created a literary world that differs significantly from the dominant trends of her time. Her ability to portray the complexities of human nature, especially within the context of urban life and interpersonal relationships, demonstrates both aesthetic sophistication and intellectual depth. The analysis of her works confirms that the originality of her characters lies in their individuality and psychological realism, as they are neither idealized nor repetitive but instead reveal the contradictions and vulnerabilities of human existence.

Furthermore, her thematic focus on love, loneliness, desire, and moral ambiguity reflects a nuanced understanding of modern society and the inner struggles of individuals.

By combining elements of traditional Chinese literature with modern Western techniques, Eileen Chang not only enriched the stylistic possibilities of Chinese fiction but also contributed to the transformation of literary expression from ideological discourse to aesthetic exploration. In comparison with Lu Xun, her work complements the enlightenment tradition by emphasizing personal experience and emotional depth, thus broadening the scope of modern Chinese literature.

Ultimately, this study reaffirms that Eileen Chang is not only one of the most outstanding writers of the 20th century but also a canonical figure whose works continue to resonate with readers and scholars alike. Her literary legacy, shaped by both critical recognition and ongoing reinterpretation, proves that her writings have transcended their historical context and achieved lasting significance in world literature.

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