

Love and Marriage in Eileen Chang's *Little Reunions*:
Comparing Biography with Fiction

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This thesis examines the conception of love that underlies the various aspects of romance, marriage, and divorce, which are key themes that the novelist Eileen Chang (Ailing Zhang) returned to throughout her life. I will consider how these themes are presented in the novel *Little Reunions* to arrive at a deeper understanding of Chang herself, and to consider what she as a writer wanted to convey to the world through her readers.

Little Reunions was written by Eileen Chang in the United States and published posthumously. There has been both praise and censure of Chang and her work; yet I believe neither captures who she really was as a writer. Therefore, based on facts from several types of biographies, letters, chronologies, and prose, I examine the similarities and differences between these texts and the novel *Little Reunions*, in an attempt to more accurately present Chang's conception of love and gain a deeper understanding of Chang as a novelist. I attempt to do this through comparing the lives of the three main characters appearing in *Little Reunions* (the protagonist, Julie; her aunt, Trudy; and her mother, Rachel) with biographical events in the real-life models for these characters, namely Chang herself, her aunt Maoyuan Zhang, and her mother Yifan Huang. I also seek to clarify what Chang wanted to convey to her readers and to society more widely through *Little Reunions*.

First, I consider Chang's conception of love, which is the main theme in her work. Chang conceives of love as something pure that seeks nothing in return, that is uncalculating and unrequited, as demonstrated by the phrase "Only love without purpose is true." If we compare Chang with Julie, we see that both were in a common-law marriage and both were betrayed by love. However, unlike Julie, Chang was not in a love triangle—Chang had a strong love and mutually supportive relationship with her partner, whereas Julie experiences a gap between the ideal of love and the reality. With regards to Chang's aunt Maoyuan Zhang and the character of Trudy, Chang's aunt holds onto her love for years and finally marries at the age of 78, whereas Trudy experiences romance that goes against the customary laws of the family and has affairs with a foreign man. Both Chang's mother and the character of Rachel experience divorce. While it is possible that Chang's mother only dated one Englishman (or a Frenchman), Rachel has a child out of wedlock, and she falls in love with many people, both her kin and foreigners. While there are many points of divergence in the love experienced by these different characters and women, they are united by a common conception of the supreme significance of love.

Next, I consider Chang herself. She supported herself by working as a novelist, and experienced a sense of instability in her identity in the midst of a world of war and turmoil, in the peculiar and unstable environment as a refugee in the US. In her later years she suffered from illness, yet continued

to lead an independent life as a writer. Julie experiences a similar sense of instability in her identity as she is caught between the old ideas of traditional Chinese culture and the new ideas of Western culture; yet, like Chang, she lives out her life according to her own desires.

As mentioned above, the idea of love emerges as a common theme in the comparison between Chang's biography and the novel. However, the novel is far more dramatic than the biography, and much of its content is fictional and radically adapted from real life. In other words, *Little Reunions* is a novel in the true sense of the word and shows the novelist's great skill and craft in broadly adapting facts to give the text a sense of reality. This realism is so great that we may mistake the heroine for Chang herself. This kind of talent and ability as a novelist also demonstrates why she is regarded as an outstanding writer in the history of modern Chinese literature.

Next, I consider what Chang wanted to convey to readers and society in the novel *Little Reunions*, in terms of the following four points.

The first point relates to love. Chang presents many forms of love and marriage: free love between married people who have spouses and children, premarital sex, love triangles, women filing for divorce, premarital pregnancy, abortion, international marriage, homosexuality, infidelity, going against customary rules, children being born outside of wedlock, and love addiction. With all of these, it seems that Chang wishes to show the world that the supreme significance of love lies at the basis of it all.

The second point relates to the ways in which the text suggests a revolt against the systems of patriarchy and concubinage rooted in Confucianism and the subordination of women by men. The diverse acts of love that are presented radically deviate from the traditional customs and systems of society at the time.

The third point relates to women's education and independence. All three women in the novel are able to speak English and have experience studying abroad, which supports their independence. In Shanghai, a cosmopolitan city in that era, these women experience a privileged environment where they are able to come into contact with Western culture and values, and are able to lead an independent life that only a few could enjoy. It seems that Chang wishes to show the reader the importance of education and independence.

The fourth point relates to a negative view of inheritance. Chang presents dysfunctional families, as seen in the disordered relationship between mothers and daughters, and between fathers and daughters, which led to the downfall of old aristocratic families. In the context of traditional Chinese society, where preserving the family line and the succession of descendants is a matter of course, Julie has the pride of being born into a prominent family. However, this is compounded with difficulties related to being seen as a blood traitor in the turbulent Chinese society of the time, which may be what leads to her deep fear and aversion to inheritance based on bloodlines. Chang wishes to show the reader that, even amidst such a turbulent society, there was also a significant change in the way family relations were perceived.