Proceedings of the 3rd International Conference on Social Psychology and Humanity Studies
DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2025.20412

The Transformation of Female Images and the Awakening of Female Consciousness in the Works of Eileen Chang and Lilian Lee

Haoyang Guo[1,a,*]

[1]*School of Liberal Arts, Zhengzhou University, Zhengzhou, Henan, 450000, China*
a. guohaoyang@stu.zzu.edu.cn
**corresponding author*

Abstract: Zhang Ailing (Eileen Chang) and Li Bihua (Lilian Lee) are two extraordinary female writers in modern and contemporary Chinese literature. This study is based on Eileen Chang's *The Golden Cangue* and Lilian Lee's *Chaozhou Lane—The Woman Who Eats Marinated Goose*, analysing the character images of Cao Qiqiao and Chen Liuqing, and exploring the female consciousness in the works of Eileen Chang and Lilian Lee. Their female consciousness both reflects the striving for personal interests and the rebellion against social expectations, while demonstrating the development and evolution from dependence on men to freedom and independence, from oppressing the weak to resisting the powerful, and from repressing emotions to expressing emotions. Lastly, this article examines the origins of female consciousness in the works of Eileen Chang and Lilian Lee, revealing the influence of the authors' personal growth environment, educational and cultural backgrounds, and the changes in society and era on the awakening of their female consciousness.

Keywords: Eileen Chang, Lilian Lee, female image, female consciousness.

1. Introduction

Zhang Ailing (Eileen Chang) is a notable female writer in modern China, whose main accomplishment is in literary writing. Her works exhibit distinct feminist features and portray a group of female characters in the patriarchal society. She described the tragic fate of women of that time, indicating the torment of traditional customs and the destruction of women's spiritual worlds. *The Golden Cangue* is one of her representative novellas, which was first published in the Shanghai magazine *Tian Di* in 1944. The protagonist, Cao Qiqiao, is the epitome of women living under the constraints of feudal ethics, who holds significant research value.

Li Bihua (Lilian Lee) is an outstanding Chinese female writer known for depicting fantastic love stories. Her writing style is romantic and poignant, with plots that are intricate and bizarre. The stories she creates often embody a bold and independent female consciousness. She focuses on men and women in contemporary urban society, describes a series of female tragedies, and conveys criticism and resistance against the patriarchal society with legendary stories. *Chaozhou Lane—The Woman Who Eats Marinated Goose* (*Chaozhou Lane*) is included in her short story collection *Dumplings*. The heroine, Chen Liuqing, shares similar experiences with Cao Qiqiao, as both have experienced failed marriages. However, they differ in their attitudes toward love and life, the ways they treat their

© 2026 The Authors. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2025.20412

offspring and other aspects. The comparison of these two characters is conducive to understanding the internal female consciousness.

From the current state of research, there are abundant scholarly achievements about Eileen Chang and Lilian Lee. In the paper *The White Bird on the Embroidered Screen and the Butterfly Specimen: A Brief Analysis of the Differences Between Eileen Chang and Lilian Lee's Novels*, the author Chen Min indicates the differences between their works in the fate of the characters and the creative emotions of the writers [1]. Xu Baojun contrasts the two authors' opinions in *A Comparison of the Views on Love and Life in the Novels of Eileen Chang and Lilian Lee*, concluding that their views on love and life are both contradictory and unified [2]. Yin Xirong, in *A Preliminary Discussion on Eileen Chang and Lilian Lee*, dissects their works from the perspective of language style and plot design, and believes that there are similarities between the two authors [3]. Although some researchers have already examined the similarities and differences in the works of Eileen Chang and Lilian Lee, there has yet to be an in-depth comparative study on the female images and consciousness in their works.

To address the deficiencies of the aforementioned research, this article will take *The Golden Cangue* and *Chaozhou Lane* as examples, aiming to reveal the further awakening of female consciousness in Chinese literature through an analysis of the transformation of female characters with the development of society and the changing of ideologies. The comparative study of the female images and consciousness in their works will help clarify the development of Chinese women's consciousness, offering a more comprehensive understanding of how writers from different eras interpret female themes, thus enriching the connotation of literary research.

2. The Character Images of Cao Qiqiao in *The Golden Cangue* and Chen Liuqing in *Chaozhou Lane*

Eileen Chang proposed in *Speaking of Women*: "Ever since prehistoric times, women have been subjected to the naked fist of patriarchal domination because of their lack of physical strength. Several thousand years of languishing under masculine control gave rise to the 'wifely way' as a means of adapting to the environment in which they found themselves" [4]. This patriarchal ideology permeated into daily life and social customs, causing distortion and aberrance in women's psychology and personality. As a result, they turned to extreme acts of revenge against patriarchal society to vent their resentment. This transformation from "victim" to "victimizer" is particularly evident in Cao Qiqiao and Chen Liuqing.

2.1. Cao Qiqiao in *The Golden Lock*—From "the Eaten" to "the Eater"

When Cao Qiqiao was young, she was straightforward and endearing. She had "round arms" and "snow-white wrists", and was "the big attraction at the sesame oil shop" [5]. Nevertheless, after entering the Jiang family, Cao Qiqiao gradually became perverse and mean. Due to her humble origin and the fact that her husband was born with a soft bone illness, she suffered discrimination and exclusion in the Jiang family. The room she was assigned had "a window facing the back yard", and the other two young mistresses looked down on her, while the slave girls mocked her in secret [5]. Not only was Cao Qiqiao's dignity undermined, but her emotional needs were also left unfulfilled. She was obsessed with the third master of the Jiang family, Jiang Jize, but he had already made up his mind not to flirt with members of his family, leaving her hopes dashed. Under "the golden cangue" of the Jiang family, Cao Qiqiao's mind grew increasingly twisted. Even her sister-in-law remarked, "How is it this ku-nai-nai of ours has changed so? Before she was married she may have been a bit proud and talked a little too much. Even later, when we went to see her, she had more of a temper but

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2025.20412

there was still a limit. She was not silly as she is now, sane enough one minute and the next minute off again, and altogether disagreeable" [5].

After Cao Qiqiao's husband and mother-in-law passed away, the Jiang family divided their property, and she became even more malicious and cruel after tasting the power. She treated her son Changbai as her possession and her daughter-in-law as her enemy. As for her daughter Chang'an, Cao Qiqiao had small feet, so she insisted on binding her daughter's feet; To compete with the first and third branches, she sent Chang'an to the foreign-style school, but repeatedly impeded her learning, so that Chang'an "gradually gave up all thought of self-improvement and kept to her place"; She even lured Chang'an into opium addiction, ruined her daughter's happiness with her own hands, and turned Chang'an into appearing her "spit and image" [5]. Thus, Cao Qiqiao eventually transformed from an innocent and lively young girl into a lackey of the feudal society.

2.2. Chen Liuqing in *Chaozhou Lane*—From "Dodder" to "Executioner"

In her youth, Chen Liuqing was beautiful: "She used to be a saleswoman at Dawan Department Store and had many admirers" [6]. Chen Liuqing and Xie Yang met in an accident. Xie Yang saved Chen Liuqing from drowning and gave her a massage for nearly half an hour, which made Chen Liuqing fall in love with her saviour. Chen Liuqing and Xie Yang ran a marinated goose shop together. She was hardworking and did almost everything by herself, whether it was "cleaning, washing, moving tables and chairs, cooking, serving customers..." or even single-handedly butchering a huge goose, while her salary was "just her man" [6]. At this stage, Xie Yang was Chen Liuqing's only support, and her "pride, persistence, and assertiveness" had no way to display. All she could do was silently endure the pain brought by the marriage [6].

Until Chen Liuqing received a letter from the mainland, from which she learned that Xie Yang's lover Huang Fenglan had given birth to a son for him. This made Chen Liuqing feel greatly despair and almost committed suicide. She became increasingly silent and chose an extreme way to keep her husband by elaborately plotting Xie Yang's leaving. She successfully deceived the neighbours, leading everyone to believe that Xie Yang had abandoned her and their daughter. In reality, Xie Yang had become like one of the geese Chen Liuqing handled and was thrown into the ancestral marinade. Through her desperate revenge, Chen Liuqing was able to control her destiny. She eventually transformed from "a little woman" into someone who was "calculating and scheming" [6].

Cao Qiqiao and Chen Liuqing were both women trapped in unhappy marriages and oppressed in a patriarchal society, yet their fateful choices were quite different. Cao Qiqiao struggled bitterly in a feudal family but ultimately succumbed, from an innocent and kind lady to a paranoid and harsh mistress. In contrast, Chen Liuqing resolutely sought revenge after her marriage broke down, from a delicate and virtuous woman to one who was strong and independent.

3. From *The Golden Cangue* to *Chaozhou Lane*: Female Consciousness in the Works of Eileen Chang and Lilian Lee

Female consciousness consists of two aspects: first, women recognize themselves from a unique perspective, clarify their nature, the meaning of lives, and their position in society; second, they perceive the external world from a female point of view and understand it with female life distinction [7]. Both Eileen Chang and Lilian Lee have a mature and profound female consciousness. Eileen Chang's works suggest her concern for the plight and fate of women, which has had a deep effect on later writers. Lilian Lee expressed her admiration for Eileen Chang in her essay *Hedinghong*: Eileen Chang "has influenced more than half a century. She is an ancient well that can be explored by everyone. She is generous and unworried—no matter how much they explore, they cannot surpass her" [8]. Lilian Lee's acceptance and inheritance of Eileen Chang's have made both their works with

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2025.20412

similar feminist expressions. As the times and society have evolved, Lilian Lee also offers a new interpretation of female consciousness and demonstrates the contemporary development of female writing.

3.1. Similarities in Female Consciousness in the Works of Eileen Chang and Lilian Lee

Showalter once proposed the famous three stages of female literature in *A Literature of Their Own*. The second stage—the "feminist" stage, is primarily characterized by the criticism of patriarchal culture, the struggle for women's rights and dissatisfaction with gender inequality [9]. Eileen Chang and Lilian Lee both belong to this stage. They often interpret the female world in an introspective manner, and their works abound with the exposure of patriarchal oppression and the solicitude of individual women. The similarities in the feminist writing of Eileen Chang and Lilian Lee generate similar elements of female consciousness in their works.

3.1.1. The Striving for Personal Interests

The status of women in social and cultural fields is determined by their power and rights. Both Eileen Chang and Lilian Lee pay close attention to women's interests, and the characters in their works often demonstrate the protection and the striving for personal gains. In *The Golden Cangue*, Cao Qiqiao was married to the second master of the Jiang family for money by her elder brother who exercised feudal patriarchal power. The members of Jiang's family, in turn, looked down on her due to her poverty. She was oppressed by both wealth and power in her early life. This caused Cao Qiqiao to develop a morbid desire for money: when her nephew, Cao Chunxi, stayed at her house and kindly helped Chang'an, she suspected that he tried to seduce Chang'an to disseise her property. Cao Qiqiao also abused her parental authority: when she knew that Chang'an had given up opium for Tong Shifang and rediscovered her self-worth, she set a trap with "the caution and quick wits of the insane", destroying the "first and last love" of Chang'an [5]. In *Chaozhou Lane*, "Chaozhou societies prefer sons over daughters", so the status of Xie Yang's lover accordingly rose because of her boy. Hence, Xie Yang went more to the mainland to attend to his lover and son, and also withdrew money more frequently. Chen Liuqing argued with Xie Yang, and Xie Yang reminded Chen Liuqing that their marriage had not registered, which made Chen Liuqing realize that she might lose everything she cherished. So Chen Liuqing finally made up her mind, she devised to kill Xie Yang and placed his body in the marinade. From then on, "Even if he ran to the ends of the earth, he would stay in the marinade and could not cross the Five Fingers Mountain" [6]. Thus, Chen Liuqing could keep her daughter, the shop, and the cheating man.

3.1.2. The Rebellion Against Social Expectations

In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir wrote: "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman" [10]. The patriarchal society requires women to be "dutiful wives and loving mothers", but the female characters created by Eileen Chang and Lilian Lee do not conform to this social expectation. Instead, they resist the norms imposed on women and exhibit certain "masculine" qualities. Cao Qiqiao in *The Golden Cangue* was not a traditional woman who was virtuous and dignified. She had a fiery temper with offensive behaviour, even smoking opium to escape from reality. Cao Qiqiao was also not the "great mother" praised by the temporal society. She had detached from the maternal role and displayed the traits of a "human": dark, cruel, and selfish [11]. In *Chaozhou Lane*, Chen Liuqing rebelled against the unfairness that men could betray their families while women were expected to endure and accept it silently. She retained her identity as a "wife" by murdering her husband. She also broke society's traditional views on women's careers and gained a foothold in the male-dominated restaurant industry.

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2025.20412

3.2. The Evolution of Female Consciousness in the Works of Eileen Chang and Lilian Lee

Eileen Chang's works have a strong female colour. She emphasised that women should become "real individuals" equal to men, which lays a fairly sound foundation for women's writing. Lilian Lee inherited Eileen Chang's exploration of female themes and consciousness, and integrated her cogitation on contemporary feminist theories and society and politics into her literary creations. Eileen Chang and Lilian Lee depicted vivid female characters with their unique narrative styles. These characters reflect women's pursuit of independence, equality and self-worth in different historical periods, revealing the evolution of female consciousness over time.

3.2.1. From Dependence on Men to Freedom and Independence

Most of the female characters in Eileen Chang's works live in declining or already decayed traditional families. The society at that time did not allow women to survive and live independently without men, so their consciousness was dominated and controlled by men, and they were still inherently the appendages of men. In *The Golden Cangue*, although Cao Qiqiao hatred her sick husband, she could not leave the Jiang family to run her own business. She had to rely on her husband to live, and even after the family division, she could only raise her children with the money allocated to her by the Jiang family.

The female characters in Lilian Lee's works are freer, and their economic independence enables them to achieve personal independence. For example, in *Chaozhou Lane*, Chen Liuqing took on the heavy responsibility of taking care of her daughter and running the marinated goose shop alone after her husband's death. The business became more and more flourishing under her management, and she became "the only female owner in the authentic food street 'Chaozhou Lane'" and was interviewed by a TV food program [6].

3.2.2. From Oppressing the Weak to Resisting the Powerful

After suffering harm from the patriarchal society, the female characters created by Eileen Chang cannot and dare not fight against those who truly oppress them. Instead, they involuntarily targeted their competitors of the same gender. Just like in *The Golden Cangue*, Cao Qiqiao vented all the grievances and injustices she had endured on her daughter and daughter-in-law. She interfered with her daughter's marriage rudely and mocked her daughter-in-law coldly. However, when faced with the brother and sister-in-law who pushed her into the abyss, she could only try to please them by giving them money.

Lilian Lee intentionally creates a series of female images with a strong awakening consciousness and rebellious spirit. These women possess unyielding vitality and assertive female consciousness. Even when they are in a disadvantaged position, they never submit to the patriarchal society, displaying the charm of "overcoming hardness with softness". In *Chaozhou Lane*, after being betrayed by her husband, Chen Liuqing chopped her husband like a fat goose, and each chop was her accusation against the oppression of patriarchy.

3.2.3. From Repressing Emotions to Expressing Emotions

In Eileen Chang's works, the emotions of female characters are often repressed. Their desire for money and social status can only be fulfilled through marriage, which makes marriage a tool for profit, and their genuine feelings are sacrificed. The only thing they can do is bury their pain deep inside and become loveless and numb. In *The Golden Cangue*, Cao Qiqiao was a "commodity" traded between two families. Her family used her unfortunate marriage in exchange for substantial wealth,

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2025.20412

yet she "never even got to gnaw at the edge of the gold" [5]. Her love and material desires were neither satisfied nor understood.

The emotional expressions of the characters written by Lilian Lee are more pure and intense. They no longer conceal their feelings but instead pursue love and happiness with determination and courage. Chen Liuqing in *Chaozhou Lane* believed that Xie Yang was the one she loved. Even though Xie Yang was just a small vendor selling marinated goose, she insisted on being with him.

4. Analysis of the Origins of Female Consciousness in the Works of Eileen Chang and Lilian Lee

The female consciousness in Eileen Chang and Lilian Lee's works does not appear out of thin air but is formed by multiple factors. First, their different life trajectories, family environments, and educational and cultural backgrounds have an important influence on the shaping of female consciousness in their works. Secondly, the social and historical changes of times have also endowed their female consciousness with a unique stamp of the era. An analysis of the origins of female consciousness in the works of Eileen Chang and Lilian Lee facilitates exploring the development and evolution of female consciousness in different historical and cultural periods.

4.1. Authors Personal Factors

Eileen Chang was born into a feudal aristocratic family. Her father, Zhang Tingzhong, was an old-fashioned playboy who smoked opium, visited prostitutes, and fought with concubines. Eileen Chang's mother, Huang Yifan, was a modern woman. Due to her disappointment with her husband, Huang Yifan went abroad to study when Eileen Chang was only four years old [12]. The failed marriage of Eileen Chang's parents made her realise the indifference of the family and the difficult situation of women. This growth environment shaped her understanding of human nature, family and marriage. Eileen Chang's awareness of gender issues emerged at an early age. One of the maids in her family, Zhang Gan, favoured boys over girls. Eileen Chang argued with her, and Zhang Gan responded, "With a temper like yours, you'll end up a spinster! I hope you get married off somewhere far, far away; even your brother wouldn't want you to come home!" Eileen Chang later recalled in her essay *Whispers*: "From very early on, Zhang Gan made me aware of the inequality between men and women, and because of that awareness, I was determined to sharpen my wits and surpass my little brother" [4]. The education Eileen Chang received also played a significant role in the formation of her feminist consciousness. She used to study in a traditional Chinese private school, and came into contact with Western thought in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Hong Kong. This collision of Chinese and Western cultures cultivated her exceptional literary accomplishment and aesthetic concepts, enabling her to express female consciousness deeply and comprehensively in her works.

Lilian Lee was born into a wealthy family in Hong Kong and grew up in an old-style building. Her grandfather ran a Chinese herbal medicine business, and had four wives as well as concubines. Therefore, Lilian Lee heard a lot of disputes between wives and concubines and family stories since she was a child. These experiences provided her with rich material and inspiration for her writing. In *Chaozhou Lane*, the house where Chen Liuqing lives "has wooden stairs, dim lighting, but spacious with high ceilings... it was passed down from ancestors", which closely resembles the living environment of Lilian Lee's childhood. The pedantic mindset of male superiority and female inferiority was deeply ingrained in such traditional families, so Lilian Lee had a keen perception of gender inequality issues from an early age. After settling in Hong Kong, Lilian Lee worked as a journalist, screenwriter, columnist and other professions, which gave her more opportunities to understand the complex realities of society and the difficult circumstances faced by women. On one

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2025.20412

hand, Lilian Lee was influenced by traditional culture and historical stories; On the other hand, she was in the urban environment of Hong Kong, where she was exposed to various new ideas and cultures. This unique life history allowed her works to often blend traditional elements with modern perspectives.

4.2. Social and Historical Factors

Eileen Chang began her writing career in Shanghai in the first half of the 20th century, a critical period when Chinese society was undergoing a critical transition from feudalism to modernity. The turbulent social environment and frequent wars evoked a feeling of uncertainty and crisis in people. Therefore, her works often have a strong sense of the times and history. Through her writings, she portrayed the cruel reality and complex human nature, and depicted the joys and sorrows of ordinary people against the backdrop of a larger historical context. During this period, traditional values merged with modern ideas, and female consciousness began to awaken. However, women were still on the margins of the social structure, constrained and oppressed by feudal ethics and patriarchal culture [13]. Eileen Chang keenly observed the dilemmas and struggles of women at that time, and expressed these through her literary works. *The Golden Cangue* emerged against this social and historical background. By describing the deplorable life of Cao Qiqiao, the work truly presents the materialistic, nihilistic and inhumane life in Shanghai of that era. The factors of society and the times influenced Eileen Chang's writing, which she reflected without any reservation in her works. As Xia Zhiqing once said, "Eileen Chang is a thorough pessimist, but at the same time, she is a lively satirical writer, and a faithful historian who records the urban life in modern China" [14].

Lilian Lee lived in Hong Kong in the second half of the 20th century, when the city was on the fast lane of industrialization and experienced robust economic growth. While the citizens enjoyed the pleasures brought by the material abundance in the modern metropolis, they were also caught in the fickle and confusion caused by the sweeping changes of the era. As the pace of life accelerated, interpersonal relationships became increasingly distant, people were beginning to re-examine their love, marriage and family life. Meanwhile, Western feminist literary criticism was introduced into China in the 1980s, which had a profound impact on the creation of contemporary Chinese female literature. With the continuous deepening of feminist literary studies, female writers 'gender writing awareness has gradually strengthened, and they defended their distinctive feminist stance through their works [15]. The development of the socio-economic landscape and feminist literary theory enabled Lilian Lee's writing to become more open. Although traditional gender perceptions still exist in contemporary society, women now have more opportunities in education and employment, which has given the female characters in Li Bihua's works greater choices and possibilities, and their female consciousness has become stronger.

5. Conclusion

Eileen Chang's *The Golden Cangue* and Lilian Lee's *Chaozhou Lane* portray two typical female characters who were oppressed by patriarchy—Cao Qiqiao and Chen Liuqing. Cao Qiqiao became sophisticated and vicious under the impact of arranged marriage and old-fashioned family, relentlessly destroying the happiness of her offspring. In contrast, Chen Liuqing, confronted with the betrayal of her husband and the fate of being "kicked out of the house", chose to take ruthless revenge on him. They reflect the living conditions and psychological features of women at that time, with the transformation of their characters symbolizing the awakening of female consciousness. When their interests were threatened, both Cao Qiqiao and Chen Liuqing spontaneously strived for themselves and rebelled against societal expectations. These characteristics embody their resistance against patriarchal oppression.

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2025.20412

At the same time, due to the personal experiences of Eileen Chang and Lilian Lee and the social and historical context in which they lived, their female consciousness reflects a transformation from dependence on men to freedom and independence, from oppressing the weak to resisting the powerful, and from repressing emotions to expressing emotions. This study contributes to not only enhancing the understanding of the development and evolution of female consciousness, but also comprehending the changing status of women in the historical and social process of China. It has a certain reference value for analyzing the works of other female writers and provides useful inspiration for exploring the development of female literature.

References

[1] *Chen, M. (2008) The White Bird on the Embroidered Screen and the Butterfly Specimen: A Brief Analysis of the Differences Between Eileen Chang and Lilian Lee's Novels. Journal of Wenzhou University (Social Sciences Edition), 5, 50-54.*

[2] *Xu, B.(2019) A Comparison of the Views on Love and Life in the Novels of Eileen Chang and Lilian Lee. Journal of Yanbian Education College, 33(2), 18-20.*

[3] *Yin, X.(2008) A Preliminary Discussion on Eileen Chang and Lilian Lee. Times Literary, 132(5), 12-13.*

[4] *Chang, E., Jones, A.F. (2023) Written on Water. New York Review Books.*

[5] *Chang, E. (2021) Legend. Beijing October Literature and Art Publishing House.*

[6] *Lee, L. (2013) Dumplings. Xinxing Publishing House.*

[7] *Qiao, Y. (2001) On the ideological connotation of Chinese women's literature. Journal of Nankai University (Philosophy, literature and Social), 4, 28-33.*

[8] *Chen, Z. (1996) Farewell to Eileen Chang. Wenhui Publishing House.*

[9] *Showalter, E., Han, M. (2023) A literature of their own. Hunan Literature and Art Publishing House.*

[10] *De Beauvoir, S., Borde, C., Chevallier, S.M. (2011) The Second Sex. Vintage Books.*

[11] *Li, X. (2015) On the subversion of traditional motherhood by the image of Cao Qiqiao. Masterpieces Review, 517(29), 111-113.*

[12] *Liu, C. (2020) Biography of Eileen Chang. Changjiang Literature and Art Publishing House.*

[13] *Gu, Y. (2023). The Research on the Depiction of Female Identity in Eileen Chang's Novellas. Journal of Education, Humanities and Social Sciences, 24, 646-651.*

[14] *Xia, Z. (2022) History of Modern Chinese Fiction. Shanghai People's Publishing House.*

[15] *Zhou, Z. (2004) The dissemination and development of feminist literary criticism in China. Journal of South China Normal University (Social Science Edition), 3, 62-66.a*