

Eileen Chang's "Sealed Off" and the Possibility of Modernist Romance

Eric Sandberg

Abstract: This article situates Eileen Chang's work within both Chinese and international traditions of literary modernism. It proposes a reinterpretation of Chang's short story "Sealed Off" as a modernist romance. The story's central event—a brief encounter during the Second World War in Japanese-occupied Shanghai between a middle-aged accountant and a young college teacher—has generally been read as no more than a fantasy of romance or an instance of a failed relationship, an anti-romance. However, by reading the story within the broader context of Chang's work and of modernist writing more generally, this article argues that "Sealed Off" is an exploration of the potentialities of love under the conditions of modernity and of how such a love can be represented in narrative.

Keywords: Eileen Chang, "Sealed Off", modernism, romance

Eileen Chang may be best known to Western audiences through the critically acclaimed 2007 film adaptation of her short story "Lust, Caution," directed by Ang Lee, but she also occupies an important position in modern Chinese literature. Chang first rose to fame as an essayist, short story writer, and "paragon of modern urbanity" in Japanese-occupied Shanghai during the 1940s (Kong 283). In the years following the Communist victory in the Chinese Civil War, Chang lived in Hong Kong where she translated and wrote for the United States Information Service, becoming in the process a reluctant proponent of Cold War ideology. After moving to America in 1955, she continued to translate

and write in Chinese, as well as attempting (without great commercial success) to write for English audiences (Sun 28).

For much of her life, Chang's work was banned in Mainland China, but it remained hugely popular in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and throughout the Chinese diaspora. As Bi-ling Chen points out, C. T. Hsia's pioneering *A History of Modern Chinese Literature* was the first major step toward a wider recognition of Chang's work (97). Hsia described her as the best—and most significant—living Chinese writer of her time and claimed that her work was equal to that of modernist Anglophone writers such as Katherine Mansfield and Katherine Anne Porter (389). Hsia thus located Chang's work not in terms of a specifically Chinese literary history—not, for example, in relation to late Ch'ing fiction and its development of literary strategies that have been described as “quite akin to European modernism” (Doleželová-Velingerová 700)—but as part of a wider, transnational modernist context.¹ While this may in part be attributable to Hsia's desire to compare Chang to writers familiar to an Anglophone audience, it also indicates a way of reading Chang's work that emphasises her links to international modernist literary culture rather than to China's early twentieth-century literary culture. However, this reading is an interpretative choice that must be made carefully, with due attention to the complicated and contested history of the term “modernism.”

I. Modernisms: Western, Chinese, Cosmopolitan?

As recently as 1992, Peter Brooker described modernism as an essentially Western, twentieth-century phenomenon (xi). Today, however, many recognize the extent to which modernism has “systematically denied a membership in its pantheon to the non-white non-West” (Shih 2). This transformation is part of the so-called “New Modernist Studies” which, according to Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz is an expansion of the field of modernism along temporal, spatial, and vertical axes (737). Discussions of modernism have thus been expanded to include material created well outside modernism's conventional core years of the early twentieth century and the geographical centres of New York, London, and Paris, as well as (but perhaps to a lesser extent) material that is quite

different in type to the conventional high-culture, avant-garde, experimental literary forms usually associated with modernism. But this shift in attention poses several problems.

Shu-mei Shih argues that critical interpretations of non-Western modernisms necessarily select between different "modes of seeing" (4), which emphasize either difference and thus "hybridize and heterogenize metropolitan concepts of modernity," or similarity, which highlights a "transnational and deterritorialized modernism" (3).² If we want to emphasize difference, then Chang's work can be placed in relation to the long tradition of Chinese vernacular fiction—such as Ts'ao Hsüeh-ch'in's eighteenth-century masterpiece *A Dream of Red Towers*, which is often cited as an influence on Chang given the fact that she had apparently memorized the entire novel (Williams 735). Her work might also be seen as a key element in the development of the hybrid modern Chinese vernacular. Chang's particular contribution was the integration of premodern vernacular with "the spirit of metropolitan colloquialism" (Liu 1056). On the other hand, a reading emphasizing similarity (as Hsia's reading does) might note that the development of modern Chinese literature was significantly affected by the "all-pervasive influence" of imported forms and ideas (Liu 262). As early as 1907, translations of American and European works exceeded the production of indigenous fiction in China, an early stage in the internationalization of Chinese literature (Williams 734–735). Chang was deeply interested in both Chinese and international fiction. This interest is unsurprising given her family background: she grew up between her father, who was a nostalgic, even reactionary, descendant of an upper-class family that lived a traditional life complete with opium and concubines, and her mother, who participated in the "New Woman" culture of early twentieth-century China, travelling abroad, embracing Western forms of recreation, and having her daughter educated. In 1939, when wartime travel restrictions made it impossible for her to go to London, Chang enrolled in the University of Hong Kong to study English literature. While the university closed before she completed her degree, her literary touchstones were international in scope. Her preface to the second edition of her short story collection *Romances*, for example, references

H. G. Wells. While in “Writing of One’s Own”—a response to literary critic Fu Lei’s attack on her serial novel *Chained Links* as excessively domestic, feminine, and trivial (15n1)—Chang refers not just to classic Chinese literature, from *The Classic of Poetry* to T’ang poet Du Fu, but also to Tolstoy.

Thus, Chang can be situated with reference to both her Chinese and international contexts. But a reading like Hsia’s, which emphasises Chang’s cosmopolitan modernism, is particularly relevant not just because of her literary tendencies but also because of the development of her posthumous reputation. Since her death in 1995—which led to what Nicole Huang describes as a “final wave of frenzied media coverage of this enigmatic figure on both sides of the Pacific Ocean” (x)—and particularly since the release of Lee’s film, Chang’s international status has grown considerably (L. Lee, “Ang Lee’s” 231). In part, this can be attributed to the transnational turn in modernist studies discussed above, but there is something about Chang’s work that resonates beyond her immediate cultural context. Much of her writing is now available in English translation (it seems that her work is more accessible in English than in, for example, French, German, or Japanese), and since 2002 she has been included in the *Norton Anthology of World Literature*, a clear indication of institutional recognition. While the second edition of this anthology included Chang’s best-known novella, “Love in a Fallen City,” which according to Qiao Meng and Noritah Omar is widely regarded as one of her best works, the 2012 third edition includes instead, under the rubric of “Modernity and Modernism,” the more recognizably modernist and less well-known short story “Sealed Off” (60).

II. “Sealed Off”: A Modernist Romance

Like much of Chang’s best-known work, “Sealed Off” was written and published during the Second World War in Japanese-occupied Shanghai. The short story narrates a typical event in the wartime life of the city: a tram is caught in a traffic closure implemented by the occupation government, and its passengers must wait for the restriction to be lifted before they can continue with their day.³ As Hsia points out, this sort of wartime interruption to daily life was a relatively fre-

quent event (413), and it is thus, despite its potential for drama, in accord with what Rey Chow describes as Chang's interest in "quotidian living" (160). This is one of the factors that place Chang somewhat athwart Chinese literary history. Writers aligned with or influenced by the 1919 May 4th Movement,⁴ for example, tended to produce works dealing with large questions of social and political development rather than with the apparent banalities of daily life. But an interest in the everyday is a defining feature of modernism more generally, which tends to exhibit a paradoxical interest in extreme psychological states—consider the delirious starvation-induced madness of the protagonist of Knut Hamsun's *Hunger* or the radically limited mental faculties of William Faulkner's Benji Compson in *The Sound and the Fury*—and what Liesl Olson describes as "the regularity of the ordinary" (4)—for example, James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage*, as well as Tanizaki Jun'ichirō's nostalgic evocation of the routines of middle-class Osaka life in *The Makioka Sisters*.

It is certainly true that in "Sealed Off," despite the potential for drama inherent in its wartime setting ("Lust, Caution," for example, ends with the arrest of its protagonists by the occupation authorities in a similar traffic stoppage), nothing very much happens beyond an encounter between the middle-aged accountant Lu Zongzhen and the young college teacher Wu Cuiyuan. However, this tale of a brief relationship and its failure to develop is a fine example of both Chang's modernist use of the short story form and her exploration of the possibilities of romance. In fact, Karen Kingsbury describes "Sealed Off" as a "modernist slice-of-life *anti-romance*" (xii; emphasis added). While I certainly agree with the first two terms in this description, I argue that Chang's story might better be thought of as a romance precisely insofar as it is modernist, offering a vision of love as fundamentally ephemeral and fragmentary, influenced both by a wartime setting and the implementation of modernist poetics.

The conjunction of the terms modernist and romance is potentially jarring. In part, this is because of what Martin Hipski has recently described as the "romance gap" in our literary history of the modernist era (xii). The notable paucity of work on the mode has continued even

as scholars have begun to explore Mao and Walkowitz's third axis of the New Modernist Studies, the vertical, which includes what Hipski describes as "low modern" and "popular modernist" forms like detective fiction (xvi). While Hipski rather charitably attributes this lack of interest to the sheer volume of romantic writing published during the period, there are other possible explanations (xii). Katie Owens-Murphy, for example, has recently argued that it may seem intuitively unlikely that romance would thrive in a literary-historical era like the modernist period, which is frequently described as "demystified, disenchanting and disillusioned" (49). Yet, she argues, this is far from true; instead of neglecting the romantic, modernist authors reinvented the mode, "manipulating, challenging and revising its traditional generic conventions" (Owens-Murphy 49).⁵ Modernist romance manipulates generic conventions to deal with "unsavory realities," including "the lack of enchantment in the world, the inevitable souring of romantic love, the tedium of daily living and the unlikelihood of harmonious resolution" (59). Indeed, many modernist works offer similar re-workings of romantic tropes: consider Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out* with its questioning and ultimate rejection of the marriage plot, or the variations on the theme of failed romance in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, or Miguel de Unamuno's anti-romantic anti-novel *Mist*. These works might be described as studies in the impossibility of modern romance.

This modernist anti-romanticism is also identifiable in a Chinese context. In his influential work on wartime Chinese literature, Edward M. Gunn links Chang's work to a specifically Chinese anti-romanticism, both for its scepticism toward romantic values such as individual heroism and its refusal to either trust or idealize emotions (204). While Gunn links this tendency to the ironic and sceptical stance of interwar British writers like Somerset Maugham and Aldous Huxley (both of whom Chang cites as influences) (202), he nonetheless argues that this remained an indigenous movement based on Chinese writers responding to the social and historical realities of wartime China (198–99). There is a certain irony here, given that "Sealed Off" appeared in a collection of stories called *Romances*. However, as Kingsbury points out, this is a conventional interpretation of Chang's title, "*chuanqi*," which

could also be translated as "legends." Lin Zou points out that *chuanqi* is the name given to genres of Tang (618–907) prose fiction, as well as Ming (1368–1644) and Ch'ing (1644–1911) drama (34). The reference to Tang *chuanqi* is particularly apposite, as these were love stories which frequently focused on the impossibility of reconciling personal passion with social demands, leading to narratives of inevitable separations experienced with "gentle melancholy" (Wong 98). Thus, we might think of Chang's work as a modernist version of this older form of Tang prose fiction, which explores the possibility of the survival of love under peculiar social and textual circumstances in the most tenuous of forms.

III. "Sealed Off": The Creation of a Wartime Chronotope

"Sealed Off" is, as its title implies, a story about demarcation and separation. In her short essay "Days and Nights of China," which Chang attached as a post-script to *Romances*, she describes China as a "nation of patches" ("Epilogue" 214). While her metaphor refers more to the ramshackle beauty of a land and people defined by variegation and contrast ("Everywhere the chaos of my own people / patched and patched once more" ["Epilogue" 218]), it is also a valid description of the cultural and political situation of early twentieth-century China. Chang's generation of Shanghainese writers, for example, were born into a city marked by multiple borders. Shanghai was, as Leo Ou-Fan Lee observes, both a by-word for modernity, a "bustling cosmopolitan metropolis" (*Shanghai* 3) linked to the outside world, and a city of "divided territories" (5). Described by Shih as an "ostentatious visual reminder of multiple colonial presences and uneven development," the city was divided into multiple areas, including the International Settlement, the French Concession, the Chinese city, and the Japanese city of Hongkou (232). From 1937 to 1941, the wartime division of the city into occupied and unoccupied zones was overlaid on less formal but equally obvious lines of demarcation between traditional, modern, local, and foreign elements of the cityscape.

This reality of demarcation is reflected in the textual world of "Sealed Off," but the story paradoxically begins with an image indicative of a disturbing *lack* of differentiation:

The tramcar driver drove his tram. The tramcar tracks, in the blazing sun, shimmered like two shiny worms oozing out from water: stretch, then shrink, stretch, then shrink. Soft and slippery, long old worms, slinking on and on and on . . . the driver stared at the wriggling rails, and did not go mad.

The tramcar would have gone on forever, if the city hadn't been shut down. It was. (Chang 237)

Xudong Zhang reads this opening scene in a surprisingly optimistic register, describing the tram as a point of entry into the “bustling, sleepless commercial center of the Far East . . . assured of its eternal motion and energy, of a rationality and temporal order that underscore the passion and chaos of a modern metropolis” (349).⁶ Zhang, however, appears more interested in using “Sealed Off” as a departure point for a wider discussion of nostalgic representations of Shanghai than in the story itself. His contrast between “the familiar mechanical-temporal order” of Shanghai and what he identifies as the “strange temporality” of the “urban unconscious” of the city represented by the immobilized tram is effective but fails to do justice to the odd discomfort of Chang’s description of quotidian Shanghai (352). The passage’s emphasis on the endlessness of the tracks (both spatially and temporally), and their metaphorical transmutation into undulating worms, is far from the vision of rational, confident, modern cosmopolitanism presented by Zhang. Instead, it creates an atmosphere at once claustrophobic and stultifying; what Zhang characterizes as the “movement, fluidity, and restlessness” of the city seems more like stagnant repetition, a sort of loathsome uniformity (350). For Zhang, the shutting down of the city that interrupts the tram’s journey transforms “the openness of the urban space” into “the city as a fortress” (350), but this reading seems to ignore the negative images associated with the city before the emergency.

Instead of operating as a denial of urban fluidity, I argue that the sudden appearance of war amidst peace disrupts the seemingly endless horror of undifferentiated, quotidian timelessness; it is the appearance of event in the matrix of the eventless. We may think of this interruption in light of Fredric Jameson’s discussion of modernism’s imperative

to "produce something which resists and breaks through the force of gravity of repetition" (17), but in this case a disruption of narrative rather than (or in addition to) an innovation or discontinuity on the level of form. In Zhang's reading, Shanghai becomes dystopian when war intrudes upon it, freezing progress and revealing the "internal fractions" that define the city (350), but it may well be that war disrupts an already dissatisfactory modern reality. Ke Ling, a dramatist and editor who played an important role in Chang's literary success in wartime Shanghai, points out that by creating a new literary and cultural space, the Japanese conquest of Shanghai allowed Chang to fulfil her literary ambitions. He also notes the way this instance of opportunity-amidst-disaster is paralleled by the conclusion of "Love in a Fallen City," in which the Japanese conquest of Hong Kong allows the heroine, Liusu, to achieve romantic victory (Y. Zhang 360). As Belinda Kong puts it, in the novella the "razing" of Hong Kong "becomes the precondition to previously marginal lives' regeneration" (285). Xiaoping Wang even describes this combination of romantic anxiety and opportunity in a wartime city as Chang's "archetypal, paramount thematic concern" (565). If, for Chang, war paradoxically includes within its range of significations a form of personal and creative opportunity, we should not be surprised to find a similar scenario in "Sealed Off." The question, then, is to what extent the differentiated wartime world represented by the sealed-off city represents a viable alternative to normal life and what exactly it offers in its place.

The potential transformation in "Sealed Off" arises from separation, which disrupts the continuity indicated in the story's opening lines. It is first indicated by the alarm announcing the blockade: "The streets were sealed off. 'Ding-ding-ding-ding' rang the bell. Each 'ding' was a small cold dot: dot after dot, they formed a line that cut through time and space" (Chang 237). This typically modernist gesture operates both on the level of the sign, as a textually self-aware typographical demarcation between pre- and post-alarm sections of the story, and on the level of the sign's referent, separating the two "worlds" of the story—the everyday and the state of exception. In his discussion of "Love in a Fallen City," Wang proposes Bakhtin's chronotope, or "the intrinsic connectedness

of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature” (Bahktin 84), as a way of understanding the “borrowed time and space” of wartime Hong Kong in which alternative forms of subjectivity and relationship can be developed (Wang 573). A similar form of temporo-spatial alterity is created in “Sealed Off” by the ringing of the alarm bell. But this initial rupture, caused by the alarm, is followed by further demarcations: people in the streets rush around, “those on the left . . . to the right, those on the right . . . to the left,” while “metal shop gates came rattling down” (Chang, “Sealed Off” 237). Within this divided space, the tram is another sealed off area, a closed room within the closed city, in which time is suspended: the “city sat dozing in the sun, its head resting heavily on people’s shoulders, its drool slipping slowly down their shirts” (237). It is not immediately clear if this post-alarm reality is being represented in positive terms. There is something unpleasant about this pronounced immobility, and the imagery Chang employs to characterize it (the drooling neighbour) is no more palatable than that which characterizes the pre-alarm city (oozing worms). But it does, nonetheless, create a space of relative freedom.

This freedom, however, does not occur immediately; nor is the separation between the two textual worlds or chronotopes complete. Conversations continue, some passengers get off the tram and continue their journey on foot, and many of the characters who stay continue to orient themselves toward their everyday concerns. Office workers resume interrupted discussions, a husband and wife squabble over domestic issues, and Lu Zongzhen worries about the steamed buns he bought for his wife. However, this continuity breaks down the longer the occupants of the tram are separated from the outside world. Lee argues that the separation caused by the alarm allows Chang to create a space in which the story can unfold “at one stroke” (*Shanghai* 290), but this does not seem to be an accurate description of Chang’s incremental development of the alternative chronotope. Consider the way Zhongzhen’s thoughts about the steamed buns only gradually move from everyday complaints over the difficulty in finding them and concern over the fact that he looks undignified carrying them, to an intensified attentiveness to the buns themselves (“snowy white mounds, giving off soft little whiffs of

sesame oil"), to a recognition of difference when he notices that the ink from the newspaper wrapping had "transferred to the bun, and the writing was in reverse, as in a mirror" (Chang, "Sealed Off" 239). The normal language of the everyday world—"Obituaries . . . Positions Wanted . . . Stock Market Developments . . . Now Playing"—is transformed, and in the process, major elements of modern life, work, business, entertainment, and even death itself, are rendered absurd, "funny, somehow, seen on a bun" (239).⁷ This literal reversal of signification indicates one of the main trajectories of this story as the creation of an alternate chronotope allows for the articulation of an alternate vision of modern life.

This potential alterity is central to the encounter between Lu Zongzhen and Wu Cuiyuan, both of whom are represented as fragmentary beings. Zongzhen first glimpses Cuiyuan through a torn advertisement that reveals only parts of her face—chin, eyes, eyebrows, hair—each in "isolation, one after another," while Cuiyuan sees him in turn as an assemblage of discrete parts, first "the edges of his nostrils" and then "the hand at the end of his sleeve" (244).⁸ Their interaction and dialogue, at least initially, occurs in repetitive, predictable patterns, as if they recite lines from a social script that precedes them:

"Here it comes," thought Cuiyuan. "His wife doesn't understand him. Every married man in the world seems to be in desperate need of another woman's understanding."

Zongzhen hesitated, swallowed hard, and forced the words out: "My wife—she doesn't understand me at all." (246)

Neither Cuiyuan nor Zongzhen exists at this stage in the story as an integral self. Instead they are, and perceive each other as, discontinuous beings who repetitively perform inauthentic patterns of behaviour. Their unsatisfactory lives similarly fail to cohere into meaningful wholes. Cuiyuan is an English teacher at Shanghai University, where she has been enormously successful. Indeed, her rapid success has "set a new record for women's professional achievement" (241). Yet she remains uncomfortably situated between the modernity and Westernization implied by her career and the familial demands of traditional Chinese

society, most particularly the necessity to make a good match and bring home a “wealthy son-in-law” (241). The narrator compares Cuiyuan’s life to a Bible, translated from “Hebrew to Greek, from Greek to Latin, from Latin to English, from English to Mandarin Chinese” and then, when read by Cuiyuan, from Mandarin to Shanghai dialect; “[s]ome things,” the narrator observes in a masterpiece of laconic understatement, “did not come through” (241). Zongzhen in turn despises his uneducated wife and her family despite his own “limited intellect” (247), and his situation makes him all too aware of the pointlessness of life: “In the morning,” he tells Cuiyuan, “I take the tram to work, and in the evening I take it home, but I don’t know why I’m going to work, or why I’m going home!” (245). His life is thus a lived version of the grotesque and undifferentiated changeless continuity described in the opening passages of the story.

To this point, the alternate chronotope of the military emergency has done little but place the two characters next to each other; their conversation, while intimate, remains superficial. It is only after another reminder of the fundamentally different nature of the wartime chronotope that the story’s modernist romance is able to develop: “The street erupted in noise as two trucks full of soldiers rumbled by. Cuiyuan and Zongzhen stuck their heads out to see what was going on; to their surprise, their faces were drawn into sudden proximity” (247). This sudden intensification of intimacy is brought on by the war’s suspension of the quotidian, and it is from this point that the narrative begins to develop into a romance as Cuiyuan and Zongzhen see each other’s faces “tension-charged like a close-up on a movie screen” (247).⁹ This metaphor no doubt derives from Chang’s interest in film; she not only watched American and Chinese film voraciously but also reviewed movies and wrote several screenplays (Lee, *Shanghai* 276). The cinema was a favourite setting for her stories as a space that encapsulated much of the “wonder of the modern,” its startling new technologies and narratives offering up seemingly limitless imaginative possibilities (277). But here Chang is in effect borrowing a film-making technique, the close-up, both to indicate the ways her characters’ imaginations are inhabited by the world of the cinema and to transplant the emotional charge of cin-

ematic romance into her story. The sudden intimacy created by this "close-up" resolves the two previously fragmentary characters into two whole beings. Cuiyuan's face is no longer seen as a sequence of unrelated parts; it is instead like "the spare, simple peony of a watercolor sketch" (247), an image of wholeness aestheticized and mediated through a traditional Chinese form. Zongzhen in turn is no longer "an accountant, a father, a head of a household, a passenger on a tram, a customer in a store, a local citizen"; that is, he is no longer the performer of his limited and limiting social roles, but "only and entirely a man" (247). In a movie review published in 1943, Chang argued that while "the beams projected by the silver lantern" of the movie projector "often stray rather far from reality, they may well prompt us to reflect on ourselves" ("By the Light" 93). We may thus be able to read this sudden, cinematic intimacy as not merely an illusion brought about by their screen-idol fantasies but also as something that reflects back on reality.

Huang argues that in "Sealed Off" the borders dividing the city are intensified by the war (23), and this is certainly true on one level. Yet intimate spaces are also created, as separation from the quotidian gives rise not only to further atomization but also, at least in the case of these two central characters, cohesion: "They were," the narrator claims, "in love" (Chang, "Sealed Off" 247). No longer fragmented and separated, Zongzhen is able to share his "secret sorrows" and tell Cuiyuan about "all kinds of things" (247). Cuiyuan in turn is able to contemplate abandoning her "prim and proper family" and her unsatisfactory life balanced between the competing demands of modernity and tradition in order to be with Zongzhen (248). As the tram fills up with passengers again as the blockade is about to be lifted, the two "lovers" are pressed "closer, then closer again" (249). This physical intimacy created at the end of the crisis, at the very moment at which time will resume its relentless progress and space assume again its normal dimensions, is the centre of Zongzhen and Cuiyuan's romance—they can only wonder why they had not been "sitting closer on their own" (249).

However, as Terry Eagleton points out with his usual mordant humour, "happiness is not a plausible condition in the modern age" (174). Within moments, normalcy reasserts itself, and their love disap-

pears. Zongzhen is overcome by conventional scruples: “I can’t let you sacrifice your future! You’re a fine person, with a good education . . . and I, I don’t have much money. I can’t ask you to bury yourself like that” (Chang, “Sealed Off” 249). Cuiyuan immediately abandons the incipient relationship, imaginatively resigning herself to a bleak and loveless future with a husband who “could never be as dear as this stranger met by chance . . . on a tram in the middle of a sealed-off city” (249). The centripetal force of the emergency is replaced by the centrifugal force of the everyday. This becomes all the more apparent when the alarm is lifted, and the story circles back on itself: “‘Ding-ding-ding-ding’ rang the bell. Each ‘ding’ was a small, cold dot: dot after dot, they formed a line that cut through time and space” (250). On the other side of this line, Zongzhen and, more particularly, Cuiyuan find themselves back in the everyday world. When Cuiyuan sees Zongzhen now, she realizes that “everything that had happened while the city was sealed off was a nonoccurrence,” nothing more than an “unreasonable dream” dreamt by the “whole city of Shanghai” (251). The story concludes with the tram driver singing: “Sad, sad, sad! No money do I have! Sad, sad, sad—” (251). We might read this as a comment on the failure of Zongzhen and Cuiyuan’s relationship, as an elegiac note of mourning for missed opportunity and lost love. Yet when “an old beggar woman . . . limp[s] across the street in front of the tram” and the driver curses her (“Swine!”), it clearly subverts this mood (251). “Sealed Off” thus ends on a dual note, which makes it difficult to secure a fixed reading of the story’s romance. Was the relationship established by Zongzhen and Cuiyuan merely a fanciful dream, as she comes to believe, or does the sealed-off space of the wartime city offer some potential for a redemptive love?

IV. Modern Love: Fantasy or Ephemeral Reality?

For some readers, the answer to this question is clear. Lee argues that tales of unrequited love and unsatisfactory marriage are typical of Chang’s fiction (*Shanghai* 285), describing whatever it is that happens between Zhongzhen and Cuiyuan as a “romantic fantasy” (289). Xudong Zhang similarly characterizes it as “an imagined romance” (351), while for Gunn it is no more than Cuiyuan’s “vain fantasy” (214). The text cer-

tainly provides support for such readings, yet certain key elements of the story may transform, or at least inflect, our answer—or indeed the question itself. By focusing too closely on the relationship between Zongzhen and Cuiyuan and by limiting our interpretative question to the status of their relationship, we may be missing the broader implications of Chang's story. Perhaps the more appropriate question concerns not just the individual relationship that occurs (at whatever level) during the emergency but also the conditions under which Chang implies love and romance might be possible in the modern world and how they might be articulated in a modernist text.

Part of the answer to this question lies in the story's creation of a chronotope in which the impact of the war is heightened by separation and concentration. This wartime moment, cut off from its surroundings and thus intensified, appears in several of Chang's stories. In "Love in a Fallen City," for instance, wartime Hong Kong is an "uncertain world" where not even "money, property, the permanent things" are reliable (Chang 164). In the radically altered wartime conditions of the "dead city," however, love becomes possible:

The only thing she could rely on was the breath in her lungs, and this person who lay sleeping beside her. Suddenly, she crawled over to him, hugging him through his quilt. He reached out from the bedding and grasped her hand. They looked at each other, saw each other entirely. It was a mere moment of deep understanding, but it was enough to keep them happy together for a decade or so. (164)¹⁰

In "Writing of One's Own," Chang notes that this couple's relationship "remains prosaic, earthbound" (17). Nonetheless this momentary instant of perception—it is interesting to note that here, as in "Sealed Off," the way love sees the other is not as a disparate set of unconnected features but as a whole—has long-lasting effects even after the war is over: ten years of happiness are, after all, better than nothing. Similarly, in "Lust, Caution" it is only under the powerful deformation of time and space caused by the war that Mr. Yi and Chia-chih are able to meet and find, again under unusual conditions, something that might be de-

scribed, however briefly and in however twisted a form, as love. Thus for Chang one of the pre-conditions for love seems to be the very sort of demarcation from the quotidian that appears in “Sealed Off.” At the end of the story, when the tram is again moving, Cuiyuan sees people who flash in and out of her field of vision and thus “lived, lived for that one moment” (Chang, “Sealed Off” 250). So too might we read Cuiyuan and Zongzhen’s relationship not as the “nonoccurrence” or “unreasonable dream” that Cuiyuan herself identifies it as—along with many subsequent critics—but instead as a manifestation of a momentary, modern love (250).

The question can also be approached via the genre of the short story, which is arguably a quintessentially modern form of narrative. As Paul March-Russell argues, the introduction of the neologism “short story” toward the end of the nineteenth century indicated a “redefinition of literature” involving both production and consumption (1). This is certainly true in a Chinese literary context, within which the short story played a central role in exploring and articulating transformations in identity during the first half of the twentieth century in ways that, as Milena Doleželová-Velingerová observes, did much to align Chinese prose fiction with broader global tendencies: “[I]ts numerous artistic advances,” she writes, were “strikingly similar” to those found in modern Western writing (729–30). One of the key innovations was the use of the short story as “a means of capturing the passing moment” (March-Russell 24). March-Russell is speaking of the Western short story—he takes as examples comments by V. S. Pritchett, Nadine Gordimer, and Raymond Carver—but this claim is directly comparable with, for example, Wang Zengqi’s 1947 essay “The Essence of the Short Story,” in which he implies that the short story, rather than the novel, is best able to register the “scattered” nature of a modern life “filled with coincidence” (qtd. in FitzGerald 1). This is of course particularly true of the modernist short story in both its Western and Chinese forms, which as Dominic Head (among others) argues is particularly well suited to capturing the “episodic nature of twentieth-century experience” (1).

This correlation between form and content—the brevity and fragmentary nature of the short story matching the perceived evanescence

and dispersal of modern experience—is particularly relevant to “Sealed Off,” which focuses on a moment textually cut off from its surroundings both in terms of time and place. Within this moment, then, we might expect to find no more than a momentary relationship, in this case a momentary romance. Further, if we accept the widespread description of modern experience as inherently fissiparous, this is both aesthetically and ethically the most appropriate approach available to Chang; to write of a whole life, and thus a whole romance, would be to ignore the conditions under which modern life is lived and experienced. The wartime setting only emphasises this limitation, at once enabling romance and extinguishing it. A final consideration is the claim that modernist short stories “disrupt the possibility of easily unified visions of modern life” (Gillies and Mahood 27)—fragments do not easily cohere into wholes. If we accept this, part of a reading of “Sealed Off” necessarily involves a suspension of judgment and an acceptance of alternate possibilities co-existing, although conflicting, within the same moment. Thus, Cuiyuan and Zongzhen’s romance could be seen as both existing and not existing, succeeding and failing, in a modern way. As Head points out, “dissonance is the *crux*” of modernism’s “creativity,” and also, we might add, of its vision of life (30; emphasis in original).

This leads to a third possible approach to Cuiyuan and Zongzhen’s romance based on the broader context of modernity and modernism. Antonio Gramsci famously described the dilemma of the modern in terms of morbidity and failed fecundity: “[T]he old is dying and the new cannot be born” (276). Writing some fifteen years after Gramsci, Chang expresses a similar sense of the fundamental incompleteness of the modern moment in “Writing of One’s Own” when she links her literary techniques to the suspended quality of her time. “In this era,” she writes, “the old things are being swept away and the new things are still being born” (17). Like Gramsci, she characterizes her time as one of not-yet-becoming; her time, like Hamlet’s, “is out of joint” (Shakespeare 1.5.196). “People,” Chang writes, “sense that everything about their everyday lives is a little out of order, out of order to a terrifying degree”; this is the “nightmare of the era” (“Writing” 17–18). One of the most interesting aspects of Chang’s claim is the way it slides

from a sense of slight disorder to one of almost overwhelming intensity, erasing the gap between unease and terror. For Chang, one of the main results of this condition of in-betweenness is that “until this historical era reaches its culmination, all certainty will remain an exception” (17). This vision of her epoch may help us to better understand the version of modern romance articulated in “Sealed Off”—especially when taken alongside the formal implications of the short story discussed above.¹¹ Rather than presenting a failed romance, or a failure of romance itself, “Sealed Off” presents an in-between relationship that resists conclusive interpretation.

V. Conclusion: Modern Love

The emotional tone of “Sealed Off” is established by the conjunction of romance and anti-romance, the possible and the impossible, the experienced fragment and the imagined plenitude. This is a story nostalgic for the moment’s passing even as it occurs, elegiac for vanished opportunity, and full of a despairing trepidation for the future. In a one-page piece entitled “Love” published in her 1945 collection *Written on Water*, Chang offers a spare and haunting narrative of romance. In the story, a young woman standing at her back door sees the young man who lives next door: “He walked toward her, came to a halt close by, and said softly: ‘So you’re here, too?’ She did not say anything, and he did not say more. They stood for a moment and then went their separate ways” (Chang, “Love” 79). And this episode is the totality of the love: “That was all” (79). Yet the memory of this moment—of recognition, of communication, of love—follows the young woman through her life. The episode concludes with a rhetorical question that highlights the centrality of love despite its brevity: “When you meet the one among the millions, when amid millions of years, across the borderless wastes of time, you happen to catch him or her, neither a step too early nor a step too late, what else is there to do except to ask softly: ‘So, you’re here too?’” (79).

Lee argues that it was the peculiar conditions presented by the Japanese occupation of Shanghai that allowed Chang to transform a very ordinary story into an “extraordinary romance,” but he also claims that these

same factors disrupt the "romantic fantasy" and bring the characters "back to reality" (*Shanghai* 291); the story as a whole is "a dream framed by reality, a fantasy narrative framed by a realistic setting" (290). Yet to identify the moment of mutual human recognition—the moment when the temporal, spatial, and social deformations of the wartime environment enable genuine human contact—as no more than a fantasy ignores the multiple levels on which the moment exists in Chang's writing, and indeed in modernist writing more generally. Joseph Conrad has his moments of vision, Joyce his epiphanies, Woolf her moments of being, and to label these intensities of perception, understanding, and feeling as "fantasy" would be to radically misunderstand the central drive of modernist writing. In Chang's modernist fictional world, the moment is all that can safely or reliably be claimed, and it is in this moment, cut off from the circumstances and standards of normal life and normal time, that love, of however an attenuated form, becomes possible.

"Sealed Off" can thus be seen as an emblematic modernist short story, matching form to content and content to form, as well as offering a version of love that is perhaps as real as any love can be—even if it is also a moment that always comes, as Chia-chih recognizes in "Lust, Caution," "too late" (Chang 30). Chang asserts that the experiences during the siege of Hong Kong taught her a lesson: "If there is something you want to do, do it right away; even then, you might already be too late" ("Ashes" 50). It is this sense of belatedness for the always ephemeral, yet astonishingly rich, that most strongly conditions her vision of the potentialities of modern love.

Acknowledgments

I would like to offer my warmest thanks to the four anonymous reviewers whose comments helped me hugely in developing this piece.

Notes

- 1 Hsia places Chang alongside exclusively women writers, which may be an indication of the gender politics of the era.
- 2 Shih also notes that, in the case of Chinese modernism, the situation is particularly unsuited to simplistic binary thinking due to the presence of Japan as an

- independent, non-Western colonial presence and a “mediating transmitter” of modern cultural ideas (4).
- 3 I am using Kingsbury’s translation of the story and thus accepting her rendering of the original title, “*Fengsuo*.” Both Hsia and Huang use the literal translation “Blockade,” but Huang’s argument that the word “blockade” more effectively “frames” the story and offers a metaphor for the “confined time and space particular to the besieged city during the years 1941 to 1945” (22) is unconvincing, particularly because the city was not under siege but occupation.
 - 4 This was a social, intellectual, and political protest movement named after the May 4th, 1919 Beijing student demonstrations against the Chinese government’s acceptance of the terms of the Treaty of Versailles, which granted Chinese territory in Shandong Province (previously colonized by Germany) to Japan. The movement was an important stage in the modernization of China and led to the reinvigoration of the Nationalist Party and the birth of the Chinese Communist Party.
 - 5 While Owens-Murphy discusses the broader category of romance as a magical or fantastic form rather than the subset of the romantic tradition which focuses on love, Fuchs writes that the latter form includes elements of the romance tradition, including a nostalgic view of the past, an idealizing tendency, and a focus on a female-oriented world revolving around love (125). Thus Owens-Murphy’s observations on modernist romance can be applied to the romance-as-love-story.
 - 6 The setting of this story on a tram also helps place it within a dual context of modernity and modernist writing. The tram, as Lee points out, is a “vehicle of modernity” with which Chang was enamoured (*Shanghai* 289), and a number of other modernist writers used public transport as fictional settings imbued with a sense of the new. For instance, Richardson’s Miriam rides at the top of an omnibus through London, feeling confident “in the tranquil sense of being carried securely forward” (194), while Woolf’s Elizabeth Dalloway rides an omnibus “like the figure-head of a ship (149).
 - 7 Not all the passengers participate in this textual inversion; many read whatever is available, from newspapers to shop signs, simply to fill the “terrifying emptiness” created by this interruption of daily routines (Chang, “Sealed Off” 239). Reading thus functions both as a marker of difference and as what Huang describes in her discussion of the scene as “a structure of a life that was constantly undermined by outside forces” (53).
 - 8 Zongzhen sees Cuiyuan’s features framed within an advertisement for “Lacova powdered milk,” which shows a “fat little child” (Chang, “Sealed Off” 244). This advertisement would be part of what Lee describes as the “new public discourse of domesticity,” which emphasizes familial health and hygiene, literally framing Cuiyuan within a gendered role: she is either a woman reduced to childishness or a potential producer of children (*Shanghai* 69). Cuiyuan, on the other hand sees, or at least thinks she sees, Zongzhen as a “real person” (Chang, “Sealed Off”

- 244). Another reading of this story, then, could be traced from this fundamental disjunction between the two characters' modes of perception, the interpretative frameworks they apply to their "reading" of the other, and would highlight the way the characters' interaction is mediated by socially established gender norms.
- 9 Haiyan Lee reads Chang's "Lust, Caution" in relation to Levinas' philosophy and its focus on the face of the other as "a living presence" (66) which "speaks to me and thereby invites me to a relation" (198).
- 10 It is interesting to note that here, as in "Sealed Off," one of the effects of this moment is the perception of the other not as a disparate set of unconnected features but as a whole being.
- 11 Chang's view of her era as fundamentally unstable and liminal may also help explain the change she made to the ending of "Sealed Off" for the 1944 version published in *Romances*. In the first version, published in 1943 in *Heaven and Earth Monthly*, the story concludes with Zongzhen returning home and remembering his encounter with Cuiyaun; this ending clearly indicates his regret and longing for change and thus reduces the ambiguity of the romance. Kingsbury also notes that the first ending is similar in tone to the ending of "Red Rose, White Rose," and speculates that the revision may have been intended to clearly differentiate the two stories ("Re: Eileen Chang").

Works Cited

- Bakhtin, M. M. "Forms of Time and the Chronotope in the Novel: Notes toward a Historical Poetics." *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Edited by Michael Holquist, translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, U of Texas P, 1981, pp. 85–258.
- Brooker, Peter. Editor's Preface. *Modernism/Postmodernism*. Edited by Brooker, Longman, 1992, pp. xi-xii.
- Chang, Eileen. "By the Light of the Silver Lantern." *Written on Water*. Translated by Andrew F. Jones, Columbia UP, 2005, pp. 93–96.
- . "Chained Links [Lianhuan tao]." *Selected works of Zhang Ailing* [Zhang Ailing Wenji], vol. 2, Anhui wenyi chubanshe, 1992, pp. 203–72.
- . "Epilogue: Days and Nights of China." *Written on Water*. Translated by Andrew F. Jones, Columbia UP, 2005, pp. 213–18.
- . "From the Ashes". *Written on Water*. Translated by Andrew F. Jones, Columbia UP, 2005, pp. 39–52.
- . "Love." *Written on Water*. Translated by Andrew F. Jones. Columbia UP, 2005, p. 79.
- . "Love in a Fallen City." *Love in a Fallen City*. Translated by Karen S. Kingsbury, New York Review Books, 2007, pp. 111–167.
- . "Lust, Caution". *Lust, Caution and Other Stories*. Edited and translated by Julia Lovell, Penguin, 2007, pp. 3–37.

- . “Preface to the Second Printing of Romances.” *Love in a Fallen City*. Translated by Karen S. Kingsbury, New York Review Books, 2007, pp. 1–4.
- . “Sealed Off.” *Love in a Fallen City*. Translated by Karen S. Kingsbury, New York Review Books, 2007, pp. 237–51.
- . “Writing of One’s Own.” *Written on Water*. Translated by Andrew F. Jones, Columbia UP, 2005, pp. 15–22.
- Cheng, Bi-ling. “Imagery and Interiority of the ‘Real’ Chinese: A Feminist Postcolonial Reading of Eileen Chang’s ‘Love in a Fallen City.’” *East-West Connections: Review of Asian Studies*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2011, pp. 97–116.
- Chow, Rey. “Seminal Dispersal, Fecal Retention, and Related Narrative Matters: Eileen Chang’s Tale of Roses in the Problematic of Modern Writing.” *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, vol. 11, no. 2, 1999, pp. 153–176. *Project MUSE*. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/9596>. Accessed 26 June 2017.
- Doleželová-Velingerová, Milena. “Fiction from the End of the Empire to the Beginning of the Republic (1897–1916).” *The Columbia History of Chinese Literature*. Edited by Victor H. Mair, Columbia UP, 2001. pp. 696–731.
- Eagleton, Terry. *The Event of Literature*. Yale UP, 2012.
- Elliot, T. S. “The Waste Land.” *Selected Poems*, Faber, 2009. pp. 39–64.
- Faulkner, William. *The Sound and The Fury*. Vintage, 1990.
- FitzGerald, Carolyn. *Fragmenting Modernisms: Chinese Wartime Literature, Art, and Film, 1937–49*. Brill NV, 2013.
- Fuchs, Barbara. *Romance*. Routledge, 2004.
- Gillies, Mary Ann, and Aurelea Denise Mahood. *Modernist Literature: An Introduction*. Edinburgh UP, 2007.
- Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Edited by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, International Publisher’s, 1971.
- Gunn, Edward M. *Unwelcome Muse: Chinese Literature in Shanghai and Peking, 1937–1945*. Columbia UP, 1980.
- Hamsun, Knut. *Hunger*. Penguin, 1998.
- Head, Dominic. *The Modern Short Story: A Study in Theory and Practice*. Cambridge UP, 2009.
- Hipski, Martin. *Modernism and the Women’s Popular Romance in Britain, 1885–1925*. Ohio UP, 2011.
- Hsia, C. T. *A History of Modern Chinese Literature*. 3rd ed., Indiana UP, 1999.
- Huang, Nicole. Introduction. *Written on Water*, by Eileen Chang, translated by Andrew F. Jones. Columbia UP, 2005, pp. ix–xxviii.
- . *Women, War, Domesticity: Shanghai Literature and Popular Culture of the 1940s*. Brill, 2005.
- Jameson, Fredric. “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture.” *Signature of the Visible*, Routledge, 1992, pp. 9–34.
- Joyce, James. *Ulysses*. Random House, 1946.

- Kingsbury, Karen S. Introduction. *Love in a Fallen City*, by Eileen Chang, translated by Kingsbury, New York Review Books, 2007, pp. ix-xvii.
- . "Re: Eileen Chang Translation Question." Received by Eric Sandberg, 2 May 2014.
- Kong, Belinda. "Shanghai Biopolitans: Wartime Colonial Cosmopolis in Eileen Chang's *Love in a Fallen City* and J. G. Ballard's *Empire of the Sun*." *Journal of Narrative Theory*, vol. 39, no. 3, 2009, pp. 280–304. *Project MUSE*, doi: 10.1353/jnt.0.0038. Accessed 26 June 2017.
- Lee, Ang. *Lust, Caution*. Focus Features, 2007.
- Lee, Haiyan. "Enemy under My Skin: Eileen Chang's *Lust, Caution* and the Politics of Transcendence." *PMLA*, vol. 125, no. 3, 2010, pp. 640–656. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25704461>. Accessed 26 June 2017.
- Lee, Leo Ou-fan. "Ang Lee's *Lust, Caution* and Its Reception." *boundary 2: an international journal of literature and culture*, vol. 35, no. 3, 2008, pp. 223–38. *JSTOR*. doi: 10.1215/01903659-2008-017. Accessed 26 June 2017.
- . *Shanghai Modern: The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China, 1930–1945*. Harvard UP, 1999.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1979.
- Liu, Lydia H. "The Translator's Turn: The Birth of Modern Chinese Language and Fiction." *The Columbia History of Chinese Literature*. Edited by Victor H. Mair. Columbia UP, 2001, pp. 1055–1066.
- Liu, Wu-chi. *An Introduction to Chinese Literature*. Indiana UP, 1966.
- Mao, Douglas and Rebecca L. Walkowitz. "The New Modernist Studies." *PMLA*, vol. 123, no. 3, 2008, pp. 737–48. *JSTOR*, doi: 10.1632/pmla.2008.123.3.737. Accessed 26 June 2017.
- March-Russell, Paul. *The Short Story: An Introduction*. Edinburgh UP, 2009.
- Meng, Qiao, and Noritah Omar. "Pure Ethnicity in Hybridization: A Returnee's Quest for Chineseness in 'Love in a Fallen City'." *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature*, vol. 45, no. 1, 2014, pp. 59–77. *Project MUSE*, doi: 0.1353/ari.2014.0005. Accessed 26 June 2017.
- Olson, Leisl. *Modernism and the Ordinary*. Oxford UP, 2009.
- Owens-Murphy, Katie. "Modernism and the Persistence of Romance." *Journal of Modern Literature*, vol. 34, no. 4, 2011, pp. 48–62. *Project MUSE*, doi: 10.2979/jmodelite.34.4.48. Accessed 26 June 2017.
- Richardson, Dorothy. "Backwater." *Pilgrimage 1*, Virago, 1992, pp. 187–346.
- Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. Oxford UP, 2008.
- Shih, Shu-mei. *The Lure of the Modern: Writing Modernism in Semicolonial China, 1917–1937*. U of California P, 2001.
- Sun, Yifeng. "Transition and Transformation: With Special Reference to the Translation Practice of Eileen Chang in the 1950s Hong Kong." *Journal of Modern Literature in Chinese*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2013, pp. 15–32.

- Tanizaki, Junichirō. *The Makioka Sisters*. Translated by Edward Seidensticker, Everyman's Library, 1993.
- Unamuno, Miguel de. *Mist*. Translated by John Macklin, Liverpool UP, 2014.
- Wang, Xiaoping. "Eileen Chang's Cross-Cultural Writing and Rewriting in Love in a Fallen City (《倾城之恋》)." *Comparative Literature Studies*, vol. 49, no. 4, 2012, pp. 565–84. *Project MUSE*, doi: 10.5325/complitstudies.49.4.0565. Accessed 26 June 2017.
- Williams, Philip F. C. "Twentieth-Century Fiction." *The Columbia History of Chinese Literature*. Edited by Victor H. Mair. Columbia UP, 2001, pp. 732–57.
- Wong, Timothy C. "Self and Society in Tang Dynasty Love Tales." *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol. 99, no. 1, 1979, pp. 95–100. *JSTOR*, doi: 0.2307/598956. Accessed 26 June 2017.
- Woolf, Virginia. *Mrs Dalloway*. Penguin, 1992.
- Zhang, Xudong. "Shanghai Nostalgia: Postrevolutionary Allegories in Wang Anyi's Literary Production in the 1990s." *positions: east asia cultures critique*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2000, pp. 349–87. *Project MUSE*, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/27957>. Accessed 26 June 2017.
- Zhang, Yingjin. "Witness Outside History: Play for Alteration in Modern Chinese Culture." *Modernism/modernity*, vol. 20, no. 2, 2013, pp. 349–69. *Project MUSE*, doi: 10.1353/mod.2013.0031. Accessed 26 June 2017.
- Zou, Lin. "The Commercialization of Emotions in Zhang Ailing's Fiction." *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 70, no. 1, 2011, pp. 29–51. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41302206>. Accessed 26 June 2017.