

The Plight of "the Other" in Simone de Beauvoir's Feminist Perspective: A Comparative Study of Eileen Chang's *The Golden Cangue* and Pai Hsien-yung's *Wandering in the Garden, Waking from a Dream*

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ABSTRACT

In the opening chapter of Book II of *"The Second Sex"*, Simone de Beauvoir famously proclaims: "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman."^[1] This central thesis exposes the tragic fate of women who are constructed as "the Other" within patriarchal society. Using Beauvoir's feminist theory as its framework, this paper offers close textual readings and a comparative analysis of Eileen Chang's *"The Golden Cangue"* and Pai Hsien-yung's *"Wandering in the Garden, Waking from a Dream"*. It explores how the two authors differentially narrate the process of female "Othering," the predicaments of women's existence, and the possibility of liberation. The study finds that Chang anatomizes the devouring power of patriarchy, revealing the double chains of economics and gender that bind Cao Qiqiao, whereas Pai, through cultural nostalgia and temporal-spatial displacement, presents the spiritual exile women suffer amid historical rupture. Both point to what Beauvoir calls the prison of female "immanence," yet they diverge profoundly in their diagnoses of tragedy, their visions of emancipation, and their aesthetic strategies.

KEYWORDS

Eileen Chang; Pai Hsien-yung; Beauvoir; The other; Immanence; Liberation; Aesthetics

1 Introduction

In numerous literary works, women are often portrayed as "the Other," their subjectivity obscured by patriarchal narratives. Eileen Chang's *"The Golden Cangue"* and Pai Hsien-yung's *"Wandering in the Garden, Waking from a Dream"* both depict this tragic fate. In *"The Golden Cangue"*, Cao Qiqiao evolves from a commodified victim into a perpetrator who imprisons her children with the same "golden cangue." In *"Wandering in the Garden"*, Madame Qian, seemingly privileged, is in reality no more than a decorative emblem of her late husband's power.

Beauvoir's theory of "the Other" incisively observes that "man is the Subject, the Absolute; woman is the Other." Within patriarchal society women are systematically deprived of subjectivity and reduced to appendages and objects of male desire.

Existing scholarship tends to apply feminist theory unilaterally to illustrate female oppression, yet few studies comparatively analyze Chang and Pai through feminist lenses. This paper therefore employs Beauvoir's concepts of "the Other" and "immanence" to conduct a close comparative reading of the two novellas. Organized around three dimensions — "mechanisms of oppression," "possibilities of liberation," and "aesthetic expression" — it aims to deepen our understanding of each work, to disclose the concrete operations of patriarchy in the context of Chinese modernity, and to provide Chinese textual evidence for, and a localized dialogue with, Beauvoir's theory.

2 The "other" in the cage

2.1 The golden cangue

Qiqiao's brother and sister-in-law marry her into the Jiang family for a handsome bride-price. There she is forever viewed as an intruder who has overstepped her class. Meanwhile, her natal family continues to bleed her for money, plunging her into an "economic dependency" from which she can neither shake off the Jiang's spiritual humiliation nor escape her relatives' parasitism—fueling the Jiang's further contempt.

After decades of endurance, Qiqiao finally gains financial control, yet the golden cangue has already refashioned her psyche. Toward her first daughter-in-law Zhishou she nurses an unspeakable jealousy; she spreads vicious gossip that tortures Zhishou to death. The second daughter-in-law "didn't last a year before swallowing raw opium." Consequently, "Chang'an dared not marry again and merely frequented brothels,"^[2] satisfying Qiqiao's perverse possessiveness toward the only man in her life.

When Qiqiao senses that her daughter might escape the cannibalistic cycle through marriage, she feels her power and wealth challenged. She becomes "a demon seeking sacrificial offerings," sabotaging Chang'an's engagement. Inviting Tong Shifang, she maliciously reveals Chang'an's past opium addiction in tones of gentle rationality, committing murder with words^[4].

As Ki Eun-yeong observes, Qiqiao "seeks to dominate others in order to escape her own anxiety and fear of loneliness."^[7] Ironically, this mechanism of oppression is wrapped in the rhetoric of "motherly love," demonstrating the insidiousness of patriarchy: the victim becomes a loyal guardian of the very system that victimized her. In the end, the golden cangue locks not only her body but her already putrefied soul.

Like a butterfly specimen in a glass case, Qiqiao's desire for Jiang Jize is doubly desperate—an eruption of long-repressed erotic instinct and a pathological craving for human warmth. Yet patriarchal law has predetermined the outcome. To Jiang, women are diversions. Confronted with Qiqiao's near-despairing plea, he merely "felt a twinge" before invoking propriety to reject her: "Second Sister-in-law, although I am young, I am not an unprincipled man."^[2]

When Jiang reappears, driven by need for money, Qiqiao's love tragedy climaxes. He spins honeyed words of lifelong devotion, and Qiqiao, starved for affection, momentarily feels reborn. Upon discovering his calculation, she is enraged: "You take me for a fool!"^[2] [This shatters her last faith in humanity. Zhu Yihong acutely notes: "In a world where nothing and no one can be trusted, Qiqiao is left with only money. Apart from the coins in her grasp, everything has collapsed; there is nothing left to believe in."^[4]

The death of desire propels Qiqiao into extreme rebellion. She actively becomes the madwoman, challenging patriarchal order through self-destruction. She publicly humiliates the Jiangs, shredding their tattered dignity with obscene curses; she tortures her daughter-in-law, converting sexual repression into sadistic pleasure. Having seized power, she becomes the mouthpiece of patriarchy, the shadow of the "Father." Yet the more violently she rebels, the more she reinforces the stereotype of the "hysterical woman." In the end, the golden cangue immolates her in hatred, making her the most vivid sacrificial offering on the altar^[3].

2.2 Wandering in the garden, waking from a dream

When Lan Tianyu, clad in a dark-green Hangzhou silk cheongsam, steps into the Dou mansion, she has already been reduced to an obsolete cultural ornament in the drawing room of Taipei's new elite. The meticulously chosen yet faded dress mirrors her awkward class position. Even more suffocating are the identities of the guests—people who once could not have been seated at her table now flourish. Collective amnesia is performed; the regime demands new myths. Although everyone knows Taiwan's huadiao wine cannot rival the mellow vintages of the mainland, they still applaud: "Tonight's performance in your mansion even Mei Lanfang and Jin Shaoshan could not surpass."^[9] Madame Qian, still addressed as the general's widow years after his death, has become an anachronistic relic of a vanished dynasty.

During the Kunqu performance of "Wandering in the Garden", Lan Tianyu briefly escapes her status as "the Other" attached to General Qian Pengzhi, achieving the sole affirmation of her subjectivity. Yet the traumatic aphasia resulting from the betrayal by her lover Zheng Yanqing and her younger sister Yueyuehong long ago not only stripped her of the artistic expression that once sustained her self-worth but also dissolved the very possibility of an independent self. The mirror-like contrast between past and present banquets reveals that whether in Nanjing or Taipei, she remains an "Other" marginalized by power. The glamorous wives around her—Guizhi-xiang, Jiang Biyue, Madame Lai—are likewise objectified existences, future Lan Tianyus whose dependent lives possess the inherent fragility and illusoriness of theatrical performance. The aphonia of the past signals the total loss of individual subjectivity, while today's silence and neglect become a cruel awakening to her eternal status as "the Other."

Trapped in the loop of bygone glory, Madame Qian resembles Du Liniang in "The Peony Pavilion". The tragedy lies less in oppression itself than in the utter loss of historical context—she no longer knows whom or how to resist. As the epigraph to "Taipei People" reads: "The swallows that once nested before the mansions of Wang and Xie now fly into the homes of commoners." The violent tides of history leave everyone adrift; as "the Other," Lan Tianyu cannot dam the torrent.

3 Female paths under beauvoir's theory

3.1 Eileen chang: a closed loop of despair

Qiqiao's tragedy exposes the hollowness of economic independence. After wresting wealth from the Jiangs, she finds not liberation but heavier chains. The distorted process of accumulation has already alienated her into a slave of money. Suspicion and defense dominate her psyche; everyone is an imagined enemy coveting her fortune. Even innocent play between her dull-witted nephew and children is twisted into sinister machinations. She rushes over, berating the boy for his "evil designs." This paranoia, born of extreme insecurity, devours her and is consciously transmitted to the next generation. She uses money to shackle son Changbai and daughter Chang'an, turning them into prisoners of her pathological possessiveness. She knows "her children hate her to death, her in-laws hate her, her natal family hates her," yet she remains trapped in the perverse pleasure of control.

In Chang's world, redemption is absent. After Chang'an is publicly humiliated by her mother before her lover Tong Shifang, the novel depicts her fate with symbolic force: "She descended step by step into a place without light." This is

both a physical and spiritual death sentence, declaring women's inescapable destiny under patriarchal domestic power. As Song Jianhua observes, "Women are no longer a social group with common interests; they become rivals or enemies fighting for male 'protection'—the true root of female tragedy."^[8] The enmity between Qiqiao and Zhishou, and Qiqiao's destruction of Chang'an's happiness, illustrate the internecine strife among women under patriarchal logic. Male characters—spineless Changbai, ostensibly respectable yet feckless Jiang Jize, even Chang'an's fiancé Tong Shifang—are all subtly "castrated" by Chang's satirical pen. Thus Qiqiao and, later, Chang'an assume the traditional "male" role of domestic tyrant, yet their exercise of power merely replicates and intensifies the patriarchal logic of control, plunder, and oppression, perpetuating tragedy across generations^[5].

3.2 Pai hsien-yung: cultural redemption

Amid the clamor of the Dou mansion, Madame Qian's alienation from the present is magnified; "Wandering in the Garden" becomes her refuge. Mrs. Xu's singing draws her into a pure aesthetic realm, evoking bodily resonance and memories of past glory. The opera constructs a temporary utopia where she can once again become the luminous Lan Tianyu. Yet the shelter is fragile. The instant Colonel Cheng appears, the aesthetic barrier collapses and she is hurled back into the reality of betrayal. Art's radiance and limitation are inseparable: it offers respite yet signals the impossibility of escape.

Confronting lonely Taipei, Madame Qian's mind is saturated with dense recollections of Nanjing. The desolate Taipei streets violently contrast with the memory of Meiyuan Lane's opulence and the lantern reflections on the Qinhuai River. This nostalgia is an active spiritual practice, a resistance against forced amnesia. Through recollection she tenaciously preserves the dignity of the "cultural China" that once conferred identity and value. In the nostalgic "utopia," the era-shattered Madame Qian and the celebrated actress Lan Tianyu are spiritually reconstructed. Yet the reconstruction is tragic. The Dou banquet is a simulation of Nanjing splendor; her memories are filtered through self-glorifying lenses, becoming a spiritual opium that widens the chasm with reality and reinforces her powerlessness as "the Other."

Pai eschews cheap redemption. When the guests urge Madame Qian to sing *Wandering in the Garden*, the aphasia triggered years ago by betrayal descends again. This physiological loss of voice symbolizes the failure of traditional artistic salvation and the collapse of nostalgia's reconstructive subjectivity. Yet redemption is not foreclosed. The muted throat breaks the linear narrative of salvation, forcing confrontation with its arduous essence. A cool breeze cools her burning cheeks, bodily returning her to the coarse yet real present. This "aphonia" opens a space for future possibilities, for seeking meaning amid fragmentation.

4 Divergent aesthetic strategies

4.1 Eileen Chang: a stark "death aesthetics"

Chang constructs a critical imagery system centered on the "golden cangue." Its power lies not only in exposing how economic dependence objectifies female subjectivity, but also in translating abstract institutional violence into a suffocating sensory atmosphere through meticulous color depiction.

"Golden" is a paradoxical chromatic metaphor. Culturally signifying wealth, happiness, and light, it undergoes total alienation in Qiqiao's life. The gleam of gold offers no warmth; it congeals into the heaviest shackle. It is both the token of her commodified marriage and the distorted gauge of her residual worth. By endowing gold with the physical form of a yoke and the function of destruction, Chang subverts its traditional positive connotations, turning it into the perfect visual symbol of female objectification and spiritual incarceration.

Chang does not isolate the color gold; she embeds it in an overall palette of gray, cold hues that serve the comprehensive visualization of the "cangue." When Qiqiao appears as absolute controller, annihilating her children's happiness, she is draped in "a bluish-gray palace-brocade gown embroidered with coiled dragons." The blue-gray forms a jarring contrast with the gold, the hue of the spiritual graveyard to which the cangue ultimately leads. In Zhishou's eyes the room is filled with "shadows of blue" and the moonlight is "a patch of black, a patch of white." These icy, deathly tones swallow all warmth and hope, mapping the psychological devastation wrought by the cangue. White, conventionally symbolizing purity, is estranged into "a white sun in pitch-black sky." This perverted white freezes and distorts every humane sentiment under the rule of golden materialism^[6].

Chang's critical force, then, resides in her deployment of a synesthetic color system. The gleam of gold is devoured and neutralized by surrounding "blue-gray," "dead blue," "black-white," and "estranged white," composing a still life of death whose background is patriarchy and money, and whose characters—whether Qiqiao who actively dons the cangue or Chang'an and Zhishou who passively bear it—see their life-colors gradually drained.

4.2 Pai hsien-yung: a reserved ritual aesthetics

Confronting historical dislocation and cultural loss, Pai chooses a distinctive aesthetic path: constructing symbolic

spaces of redemption through form itself. Intertextuality with traditional culture is foundational. In "Wandering in the Garden", the rise and fall of Lan Tianyu's fate resonates with Du Liniang's lament in "The Peony Pavilion": "Fair blossoms, fleeting years." Pai does not merely cite allusions; he elevates individual tragedy, via the highly ritualized form of Kunqu, into a collective mourning ceremony for an entire vanished era and its displaced elite ^[10].

Aesthetically, Pai eschews overt violence, substituting an elegant, reserved symbolic system. Colors drawn from the traditional Chinese palette—"indigo," "treasure blue," "silver-gray," "vermillion," "kingfisher green"—appear repeatedly. More than visual description, they are carriers of cultural identity, signifying a bygone, relatively intact past. These gentle, refined hues filter the sting of displacement, wrapping brutal history and sorrowful individuals in hazy poetry that guides readers to savor the desolate aftertaste of fallen splendor ^[12].

Stream-of-consciousness, in Pai's hands, serves the reconstruction of time and the building of spiritual refuge ^[11]. Madame Qian's mind shuttles freely between past and present, shattering linear narrative. This temporal fluidity enables the psyche to create an "utopia" unrestrained by physical space. Within this self-curated preserve, fractured cultural memories are briefly sutured, vanished beauty revived, the past becoming spiritual sustenance for the present. The stream-of-consciousness itself constitutes an interior ritual, an ideal attempt at self-redemption.

Where Chang's realism radicalizes Beauvoir's notion of "situation," Pai explores the dimension of "transcendence." Confronting historical trauma and cultural rupture, he knows direct, worldly transcendence is slim; hence he attempts symbolic, aesthetic salvation, pointing toward a possible spiritual path against nihilism.

5 Conclusion

Despite their divergent aesthetic paths, Chang and Pai resonate profoundly, jointly constituting a powerful response and distinctive practice to Beauvoir's existential feminism and, more broadly, the plight of "the Other" in twentieth-century Chinese contexts.

Both authors, with piercing insight, illuminate Beauvoir's core proposition: under patriarchy women are systematically denied the possibility of "transcendence," confined to the passive repetition of "immanence," reduced to object and Other. In Chang's *Cao Qiqiao*, tragedy springs from being utterly commodified within the family's economic chain; her every act of madness and destruction is a frantic struggle against fate. In Pai's *Madame Qian*, the seemingly refined refuge of opera and nostalgia is, in essence, passive dependence within a male-dominated value system. Her marginalization and eventual aphonia at the Dou banquet expose the futility of seeking self-redemption through memories of past glory. Whether Qiqiao's naked commodification or Madame Qian's nostalgia wrapped in poetic illusion, both are patriarchal structures stripping women of "transcendence," imprisoning them in "immanence." Their trajectories become cruel footnotes to Beauvoir's claim that "woman is not born but made" within Eastern contexts.

Their divergences mirror distinct historical anxieties. Chang's cold anatomy depicts the final madness and extreme alienation before the collapse of the old order, suggesting that female—and human—liberation must first deconstruct the institutional bases of oppression. Pai's aristocratic elegy arises from national division and the violent severance of cultural roots. Confronted not only by gender oppression but by the sudden loss of cultural tradition and spiritual homeland, his aesthetic practice seeks shards of cultural identity amid ruins, suggesting that in the face of historical trauma and identity crisis, the preservation of cultural memory is a vital bulwark against nihilism.

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